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Novel
By
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A THRILLING
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THE LOANED RANG
A Swap and Whopper
SYL MacDO
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A true experience of L. S. VANDIVER, *Laramie, Wyoming*

"A WINDING RIBBON of glassy ice faced me as I nosed my big Diesel truck down Telephone Canyon, near Laramie, Wyoming, one dark winter night," writes Mr. Vandiver. "Behind me, on a twenty-eight foot trailer, rode 27,000 pounds of freight.

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"I WAS SKIDDING TOWARDS ETERNITY when I remembered my flashlight. Its bright beam flooded the road ahead. Thanks to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, I drove the six miles safely, saving not only my life, but the $12,000 truck and its 13½ ton cargo.

(*Signed*) *L. S. Vandiver*"

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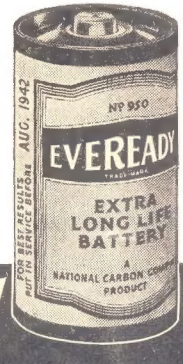

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3 G. B. FARNUM, Editor March, 1942

A Complete Walt Slade Novel

WOLF-MAN OF THE PECOS

By BRADFORD SCOTT

El Halcon, Texas Ranger, Rides Again to Battle Against the Black Forces that Grip Tortuga and the Border Country! 14

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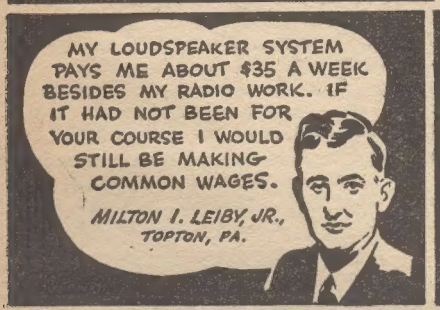

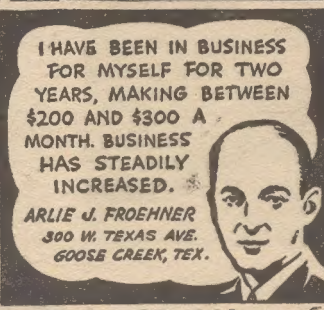

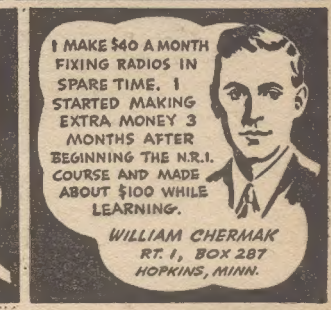

Here's The Formula That Has Worked For Hundreds

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On top of increasing civilian interest in Radio, the Radio Industry is rushing to fill hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of Defense Orders. Over 800 Broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians and Radio Operators with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are more than 50,000,000 in use) gives jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio business. Think of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs.

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Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

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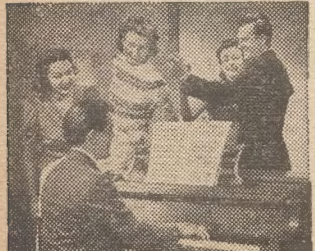

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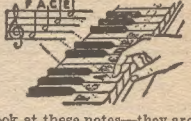

Look at these notes—they are F-A-C-E. Simple, isn't it? You are already learning to read music. It's easy to play, too. A new invention, the "Note-Finder," locates each note for you on the keyboard.

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☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

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NEVER before has there been as great an opportunity as now faces efficient bookkeepers and accountants.

You know, of course, that accounting has always been a profession of outstanding opportunity—a field in which the capable, trained man could go faster and farther than in almost any other field. But we believe that all past opportunities are going to be surpassed in the next five years.

And here's why:

In the first place, the defense situation has accelerated and complicated business. Hundreds of new plants, hundreds of others expanded, priorities, shortages of raw materials, some companies shifting to new products, and millions more men at work necessitate more bookkeeping and accounting—both by government bodies and by private industry.

Then our governmental policy forces the keeping of better and more complete records in every office and plant. It is not a matter of choice with any firm—it is necessity.

For instance Federal Securities Act, with its insistence upon publicity of *complete* facts about every company selling its securities publicly, compels more frequent and more accurate financial statements—and these in turn call for more and better accounting.

Then the Social Security tax, the unemployment regulations, the Wages and Hours Act, the Excess Profits tax and other taxes necessitated by national defense—all center around more complete accounting records.

Thus there is an insistent and growing demand for bookkeepers and accountants, a demand that already exceeds the supply and is still growing. This goes all the way along the line from routine bookkeepers to executive accountants. And it seems likely to increase much farther.

Ask for the Facts

We need not tell you what that means in opportunity for the capable man already in accounting and for the able man who gets into accounting now. Nor need we argue for the practicality and value of LaSalle training in Accountancy—over 500,000 men and women, and 2,000 C. P. A.'s have already tested and proved that.

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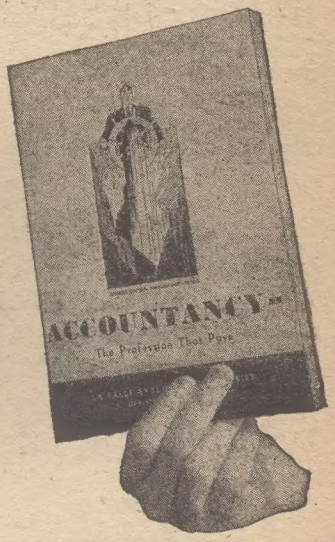
If you are dissatisfied with your present situation—and in earnest about achieving success—get the facts—use the coupon—NOW.



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Will You Let Me Prove I Can Make You a New Man?

I KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps — yes, on each arm — in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day — right in your own home — is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about **"Dynamic Tension"** and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. **"Dynamic Tension"** does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension,"** you can laugh at **artificial** muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—**"Dynamic Tension"**—will turn the trick for you. No **theory**—every exercise is **practical.** And, man, so **easy!** Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc. — to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

Charles Atlas

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I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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(Please print or write plainly)

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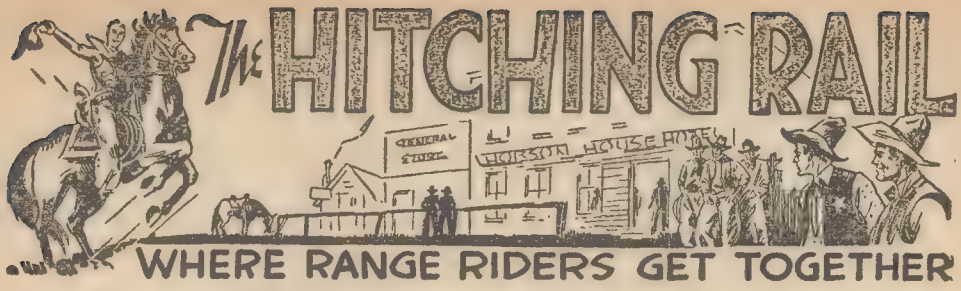
City ..... State.....



YES, suh, folks, yo're shore right 'bout thar bein' a clost bond o' kinship twixt a good man an' his hoss. Me, I done seen it demonstrated many a time.

'Course thar's horses an' horses, jest as thar's a million diff'runt kinds o' men, but take a real "top" hoss an' a cowboy what's worthy uv th' name, an' yuh've got a pair o' brothers under their skins, shore's shootin'.

A horse even gits homesick, jest like a cowpoke offen th' range. An' believe me, folks, ain't no brand o' homesickness what can compare with th' longin' uv a ol' ranny what finds hisse'f stranded in a city after he's done finished lookin' it over.

If he's got a good pair o' legs under 'im he'll be gittin' out, too, less'n he's roped hard an' hog-tied. Same way with a fine, sensitive horse. Only th' horse cain't alluz git away so easy. Why, fellahs an' gals, I've seen many a horse jest eatin' his heart out from pure unadulterated homesickness, nothin' else but.

Tex of the Z Bar Z

I'm thinkin' o' "Tex" on th' Z Bar Z out Nevada way. Tex war th' goldurndest, high-steppin'est, shinin' red stallion yuh ever met up with, an he war a whole lot more human than some people I've knowed in my time, too.

Tex war gentle fer a stallion, count o' th' way he'd been handled by th' boss an' all from th' day he war foaled. Th' boss' kid, Jimmie, used tuh ride 'im when he war so little he looked like only a hump on Tex's sleek back.

Well, Tex growed up, an' Jimmie growed some, an' then, all uv a sudden like, Jimmie got sick an' died. Losin' his only kin thataway pretty near broke th' boss up completely. Couldn't bear tuh look at Tex no more because he imagined he could see Jimmie asettin' on th' horse's back, a laughin' an' a tellin' his dad tuh watch him make Tex take a bow, tell his age, or do some other trick he knowed.

So, Tex war sold to a man in Chicago what had him a animal show an' had been a wantin' th' hoss for a year or more. Nearly made th' cowboys on th' place sick tuh see Tex go, but th' boss had spoke, an' his word war law.

That fall when th' boss shipped cattle tuh Chicago, Slim th' foreman, went along. Without sayin' a word tuh nobody he went out tuh th' show grounds an' asked tuh see Tex. Th' owner said sure, go ahead.

"But that horse ain't worth th' salt he licks," he told Slim, disgusted like. "Won't eat, won't perform none o' them tricks what made him a valuable horse. In fact he's as listless as a durned hound dog. I'm gonna sell him to th' glue factory pretty soon, git a little uv my money back."

"Mister," Slim said, "if yo're thinkin' about sellin' Tex to th' glue fact'ry, I'll buy him from yuh right now, sight unseen."

Home Again!

Well, suh, Tex war so thin an' listless Slim had tuh lead him to th' waterin' trough when he got 'im home.

Th' pore hoss didn't seem tuh have th' spirit tuh look about him none, an' he war so lean his sides fair stuck together. But fust whiff he got o' that waterin' trough his head went up, surprised like, jest like he'd recognized th' scent.

He sniffed some more, then plunged his muzzle into th' water an' drunk deep. Then he flung up his head an' took his fust look about him. A path led from th' trough beside th' corral to th' south pasture, an' another path went in th' opposite direction to th' hitchin' rail in front o' th' main house.

Tex started out, sort of excited like, on the path what led toward th' pasture, then, all uv a sudden, he whirled and come trottin' back an' took th' other path what led to th' hitchin' rail when th' boss an' Jimmie used tuh mount up.

Well, in a minute, that hoss had seemed tuh smell everything on th' place out there, an' it would a done yore heart good tuh seen him come alive. Why, he frolicked an' cavorted worse'n a durned playful kitten, jest like a colt again.

Th' boss heard th' commotion an' come out uv his house where he'd been a settin' at his desk, sort o' broodin', like always, I reckon, an' he saw Tex.

First he looked sort uv unbelievin', then when he recognized th' hoss an' saw them ribs a stickin' out th' way they did, he war plenty shocked an' angry, an' demanded tuh know th' why o' th' horse bein' there, an' why he war jest only a ghost uv hisse'f. Slim explained, an' before he finished th' hard, froze look that had been so long on th' boss' face melted right before our eyes.

"Tex boy!" he called, soft like, an' th' horse stopped his gallopin' an' listened. "Tex boy!" th' boss called again, an' th' hoss come whinnyin' tuh th' sound, muzzle

(Continued on page 12)

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 10)

out, sniffin' th' old familiar scent uv his master, pushin' him playful, like he used tuh do.

Yes, suh, Slim war right. It war jest plain homesickness what war ailin' Tex. That ol' foreman o' th' Z Bar Z savvys a heap 'bout both men an' horses, I reckon.

The Ol' Time Texas Rangers

Now, folks, I got a swell letter here I must take time out an' answer. It's from Benjamin Carter who lives in Pensacola, Florida. Benjamin sends me his photograph in his traffic policeman's uniform, an' he's shore some well set-up cop, an' don't yuh forgit it. Bet they's a lot o' traffic violations by th' gals o' Pensacola, jest so's tuh git theirselves escorted to th' jail by such a handsome officer uv th' law.

Bein' a policeman hisse'f Benjamin natcherlly wants tuh know somethin' about th' ol' time Texas Rangers, when they war organized, an' who war th' first captain o' th' outfit.

Well, son, th' Texas Rangers war a fine organization uv he-men, as yuh knows. They dressed like cowmen an' rode th' plains uv Texas be th' weather hot or cold, dust-storm, rain, or broilin' heat, an' like th' Canadian police, they got their man or knowed th' reason why.

There wuz a real need for them at th' time uv their organization, an' they filled that need for law an' order tuh th' letter an' to a man.

Them ol' boys war noted for their bravery, an' war feared by th' lawless, an' respected by all. In fact, folks had so much faith in th' Ranger as a enforcer o' law that their belief in him matched his confidence in hisse'f.

Reckon you've heard th' story o' th' Ranger, mebbe, who rode into a cow town tuh stop a riot. He war met by some citizens who war greatly surprised tuh see that only one Ranger had come.

"Yuh mean to say only one uv yuh come here tuh stop this riot?" they asked him, surprised a heap.

"They's only one riot, ain't they?" that ol' Ranger boy come back at 'em solemn like.

First captain uv th' Rangers war R. M. Coleman uv Bastrop, Texas. He war commissioned in 1836, by President David G. Burnet o' th' Republic uv Texas, at that time a separate nation.

There's still a organization uv Rangers in th' state o' Texas, Benjamin, but th' romance an' hero worship uv th' old days has sorta faded from it. Yes, suh, Texas is now a civilized country, generally speakin'.

Once a Ranger

I knowed a fellah down there who war oncet a Ranger. Later he got tuh be a regular policeman in th' city uv Dallas, Texas.

Well, Benjamin, he stayed on that job fer many years, though every day or so he'd threaten tuh resign an' go back tuh punch-

in' cows. But he'd been a Ranger too long tuh stop enforcin' law, I reckon; it war sort of in his blood. Well, this ol' boy war wrastlin' traffic on a Dallas street intersection one day when a hard-drivin' taxi driver ignored a red signal, jest dusted th' "Ranger" policeman's knees, missed th' street island by a hair, an' grazed a bus all in one dash.

This ol' policeman I'm talkin' about hailed him, then strolled over to th' taxi, pullin' out a big handkerchief from his pocket as he went.

"Look a here, yuh onery, bronco-bustin' taxi-cab driver," he growled. "I'll drop this handkerchief, an' on th' way back see if yuh can pick it up with yore teeth."

What's a Hackamore?

Well, jest time fer one more letter. Reckon I'll answer this one from Tom McKnight uv Buffalo, New York. Shore cold in th' winter up in yore diggin's, eh, Tom? Betcha! Fine for winter sports if a fellah's young enough, too. Tom wants tuh know what th' word "hackamore" means. Says he knows it's used ona horse, but cain't figger out what th' heck fer.

A hackamore, Tom, air jest a halter carryin' reins. A sort uv bridle which, in place of any bit, has a "bosal" (leather, rawhide, or metal ring around th' horse's muzzle just above the mouth.) Reins are attached tuh th' bosal as usual. Pullin' on them shuts off th' horse's wind.

(Concluded on page 112)

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Wolf-Man of

El Halcon ducked under Brandon's blazing gun

By BRADFORD SCOTT

Author of "Riders of the Rimrock Trail," "Guns of Whispering Valley," etc.

CHAPTER I

Dead or Alive

"BRING him in! Bring him in, I tell you! I don't give a hang whether yuh bring him in on his feet or on a shutter! But bring him in!"

Cale Brandon hammered the table with a force that made the window panes rattle even louder than their habitual hum caused by the ceaseless vibration of the dancing stamps in the big mill that pulverized the ore from the Brandon mines. Those windows looked out over the shelf upon which sat the mill and other mine buildings. They looked out beyond the shelf and the slope beneath and across the rolling rangeland that was Brandon's

the Pecos

A Complete Texas Rangers Novel

El Halcon Rides Again to Battle the Black Forces that Grip Tortuga and the Border Country!

great BXT Ranch. They also looked slantwise toward the sprawl of 'dobes, shacks, false-fronts, substantial brick and solid stone that was Tortuga, the town that Brandon was wont to consider, and not altogether without reason, Brandon's town.

He glared at the three men fronting him, one of whom wore a big nickel badge on his sagging vest.

"Bring him in!"

Brandon repeated it for the third time, his voice the growling snarl of a beast of prey, of a wolf disturbed while enjoying his kill. Which was just about the case here.

"But, Cale, what am I going to charge him with?" asked the old man who wore the badge. "From what I hear tell of him, seems like bringin' in

this here *El Halcon* hombre would be quite a chore even if there's somethin' ag'in him. So far as I can make out, all he did here was keep Ellis and Price from cashin' in a Mexican in a row over cards. And it seems the oiler was sorta in the right in the argument."

Slowly, ponderously, Cale Brandon rose from his chair and stood resting his huge hands on the top of his table-desk. His mighty form seemed to fill the window behind him, shutting off the light and throwing an ominous shadow over the three men who stood in front of the desk.

They could see little of his harsh but strong and comely features. But from under his tangle of golden hair his blue eyes burned with a mad glitter, and his golden beard jutted out from his square chin. The intensity of his glare seemed to burn the old sheriff's lined face.

"No charge?" he rumbled. "Reckon layin' my mine foreman up for three months, half-killin' him, ain't no charge, eh?" He shook a blocky fist under the sheriff's nose.

BUT Sheriff Quill, like many weak men, had a stubborn streak, and at times would argue with even Cale Brandon.

"Yuh'd never make it stick with a jury, Cale," he declared. "What's the sense in startin' somethin' yuh can't go through with—and set folks to talkin' about things that's best left quiet!"

"Never yuh mind about makin' the charges stick!" Brandon retorted. "All you got to do is bring him in. *I'll* take care of the rest of it. Sam Price and Bob Ellis have got friends in this section, friends that won't take over kind to what that owlhoot hombre did to them. You bring him in."

At this, the little man on the sheriff's left spoke, his voice clear and decisive.

"*I* ain't goin' to have anything to do with a lynchin', Brandon. Yuh can count me out of this business right now."

Brandon flushed a fiery red and for a moment it seemed as if he would strike the little man down. But the fellow fronted him sturdily and Brandon dropped his fist back to the table-top.

"Walker," he said quietly, "some day yuh'll go too far, and there'll be a new deputy in the sheriff's office. Who in all tarnation said anything about a lynchin'? Anyhow, there's a chore down by the Davis County line that'll keep yuh busy for the next few days."

"Much obliged," Walker replied grimly. "I'll be trailin' my rope, pronto."

He wheeled and left the office, banging the door behind him with a force that made the windows rattle anew. The nasal voice of Sheriff Quill squirmed through the noise.

"I ain't never saw this here *El Halcon,* Cale," he complained. "I wouldn't know him if I was to clap eyes on him."

Brandon gestured with a blunt thumb to the man who lounged on the sheriff's right.

"Muller will point him out to yuh," he said. "You've seen him, haven't yuh, Trench?"

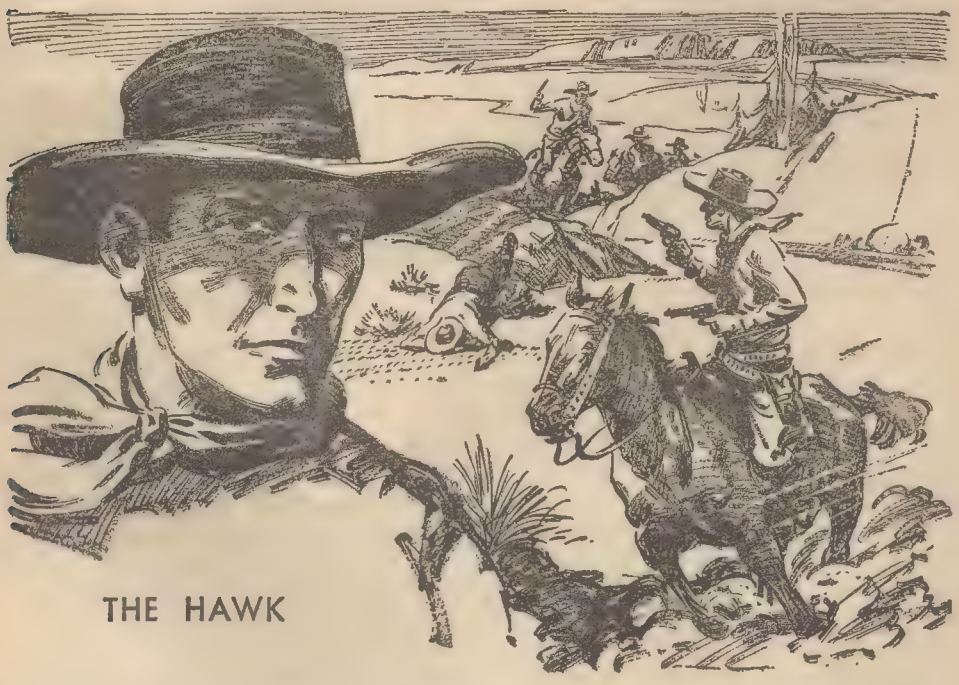
Trench Muller nodded. He was a lean, sinewy individual with sunken, sallow cheeks, a tight gash of a mouth above a long, blue chin, and a part of black eyes that burned behind a great hooked beak of a nose.

"Once," he replied, his voice dry, expressionless. "Once, and I ain't liable to forget him. Yuh recollect his kind, even if yuh only see 'em once."

"Once is all I want to see him—and all I'll need to," Brandon declared viciously.

HIS lips writhed back from strong, crooked, and slightly yellowish teeth in a wolfish grin in which there was nothing of mirth.

"I'd give five hundred dollars to see him right here in this room!" he declared vindictively.



THE HAWK

Sheriff Quill tugged his scraggly mustache. Trench Muller looked speculative.

"Five hundred *pesos*," he repeated meditatively. "That is quite a mite of *dinero* in any man's talk."

Cale Brandon dived into a desk drawer and drew forth a clinking canvas bag. From it he poured a golden stream upon the table-top. One by one he dropped the glittering double eagles back into the pouch. Trench Muller's bloodless lips mechanically kept soundless score, and as Brandon drew the pucker string tight, Trench licked his lips with the thin tip of his tongue.

Brandon let the plump pouch fall back into the drawer with a satisfying thud.

"There she is," he said significantly. "Sorta pass the word around, Trench. It had oughta get results. Dead or alive!"

He waved the pair from his office with a quick, impatient gesture, as if forcibly propelling them out of the room.

As they walked down the slope from the mine buildings, Sheriff Quill tugged repeatedly at his mustache.

"I don't like this chore, Trench," he complained querulously. "No, sir, I don't like it. I'm of a mind to pass it up."

Muller glanced sideward at Quill.

"Cale Brandon got yuh elected, Sheriff, didn't he?" he remarked with apparent irrelevance.

Quill tugged viciously at his mustache, and agreed it might be so.

"Tortuga Bank holds yore note, too, don't it?" Muller pursued inexorably.

Another tug, not so forcible this time, and Sheriff Quill admitted that maybe the bank—Brandon's bank—did. Muller said no more, and Quill launched into a rambling and complaining resume of the events that had led up to Cale Brandon's wrathful ultimatum.

"The way Tip Walker tells it, them two fire-eaters, Sam Price, Cale's mine foreman, and Bob Ellis, the gambler, had flimflammed that Mexican right and left at poker. Finally, the oiler caught on and raised a ruckus. Price knocked him down and Ellis had started to kick his head off when that *El Halcon* feller horned in. I hear tell he handled them two big salty hombres like they was a coupla calfs. Knocked Ellis plumb outa his senses and took Price's gun away from him, and busted Sam's arm in the bargain."

"Busted his jaw, too," Muller interposed. "Sam won't be outa bed for a month. No wonder Cale's fit to be hogtied. He depends on Sam. Here comes Doc Beard right now. He'll tell yuh the shape Sam is in."

The sturdy old cow country doctor joined them at the corner.

"Ain't got but a minute to gab," he told them. "Gotta hurry over to Manuel Garcia's 'dobe. Manuel's wife had a baby last week and she's been doin' poorly. Just got word she's took worse. . . . Sam Price? Oh, he'll live to get hanged—soon, I hope."

Leaving Quill and Muller, the old doctor hurried along a side street, turned up a narrow alley and finally paused at the door of an humble adobe shack. He pushed open the door and nearly fell over an ambitious toddler of some eighteen months who was held in corral by a grass rope noosed around his plump middle.

The other end of the rope, Doc noted at a glance, was dallied about the black butt of a big gun that protruded from a well-worn, carefully worked and oiled quick-draw holster. The holster, like its fellow on the opposite side, was attached to heavy double cartridge belts that encircled the lean waist of a man seated on a stool. In his arms the man held a tiny bundle of white to which he sang in a voice like springtime's promise to the flowers yet to bloom, a soothing Spanish lullaby.

After his initial start of recognition, Doc Beard did not appear surprised at the singular picture. A smile flashed through his whiskers, and his frosty old eyes were suddenly warm and friendly.

"So it was you sent for me, Walt," he said. "I mighta knowed it. Heard yuh were in town."

THE man in the chair stood up. He grinned down at the old doctor from his great height, his teeth flashing startlingly white and even in his bronzed face. Then his gray eyes lowered to the small, puckered countenance frame in the white wrappings.

"He's asleep," he said softly, nodding his black head at the baby he held cradled so gently in his long arms.

The doctor chuckled. "I reckon most anything goes to sleep or gets peaceful and happy when *El Halcon* sings to it," he remarked. "I've heard tell that sidewinders curl up like puppies and horned toads look soulful. How be you, Slade?"

"First rate, Doc," the tall man replied. "Hey, feller"—to the toddler at the rope's end—"yuh ain't husky enough yet to go swallerforkin' all over the range! Shut the door, Doc, or he'll be maverickin' down the alley."

The doctor set his instrument case on the chair and assumed a graver mien.

"How's Rosa?" he asked, glancing at the bed, upon which lay a girl with great dark eyes that dominated her waxen face.

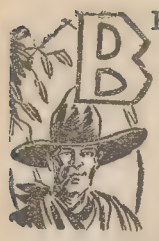
"Give her a once-over, Beard," Slade replied indirectly. "I'm sorta ridin' herd here till Manuel comes home from work and old Teresa, her mother, does her shopping. I heard there was trouble in Manuel's 'dobe and dropped in for a look-see. Figgered it wouldn't be a bad notion to send the boy for you. That all right?"

Slade was slipping the noose from about the toddler's waist at the moment and he did not see the look the old doctor bent upon him.

"*El Halcon* carin' for the sick and lookin' after babies!" Doc Beard muttered under his mustache. "Reckon there's folks what wouldn't believe it. But there's plenty other folks who wouldn't be at all surprised or see anything unusual in it. And Cale Brandon is offering a reward for *him!*"

CHAPTER II

Quick Draw



BEFORE the doctor had finished his examination, a toil-worn young peon entered, followed by an old Mexican woman with her arms full of bundles. The peon's tired face brightened as he saw the tall figure holding the baby. He removed his ragged sombrero and bowed with native grace and courtesy.

"*El Halcon!*" he murmured in liquid Spanish. "*El Halcon,* the friend of the lowly! Glad am I to see you, *Capitan!* Now indeed will all be well!"

The tall man the peon had called "the Hawk" smiled down at him.

"Sure it will, *amigo,*" he replied. "Doc'll have Rosa up and about in no time. Sit down and rest. Yuh must be tired after a day in the mine."

Doc Beard, the lines in his rugged face deeper than were their wont, was deftly manipulating a hypodermic needle. He cleansed and sterilized the instrument, glanced down at his patient, saw that the great dark eyes were closing. Slade placed the sleeping baby by its mother's side and, at a nod from the doctor, followed him from the cabin. The nod had included Manuel, and he trod close at Slade's heels.

Doc Beard closed the door softly, hesitated, glanced from one to the other.

"Well, Doc?" Slade prompted.

"Well," said Doc Beard, "she's got a chance, if she goes to the hospital over to the railroad town and has an operation pronto. I've done all I can do, and it ain't enough."

"The hospital, at the railroad town," repeated the peon. "But that will cost the many *pesos*—hundreds—that I have not."

Doc Beard made no audible reply, but his answer was obvious. Manuel Garcia stared at him, and his dark face dulled to a a hopeless apathy.

"Then my Rosa must die," he said, his voice flat, toneless, poignantly resigned to the inevitable.

Slade and the doctor exchanged glances. The face of the practitioner was suddenly old and tired, his eyes unutterably somber. Walt Slade drew a deep breath and his usually sunny eyes were coldly gray. He placed a slim, powerful hand on the little Mexican's scrawny shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said in his rich, vibrant voice. "Take it easy, feller. Don't ever figger yuh've missed yore throw till yore twine hits the ground. Go back in, now. Teresa is getting yore supper ready. I'll drop in again before mornin'. Don't yuh worry."

The peon bowed submissively and reentered the 'dobe. The doctor turned to Slade.

"And now I want a word with you," he remarked impressively.

The Hawk nodded, and waited for him to proceed.

"Walt," the doctor said, "the best thing you can do is trail yore rope out of this section. Cale Brandon is out to get yuh."

WALT SLADE looked interested, but offered no comment.

"Yes, he is," the doctor continued, "and it ain't nothin' to grin about. It ain't for nothin' Cale Brandon's called the Wolf-man of the Pecos. He's that, all of that, and he's got a mighty ornery pack runnin' at his heels. He's the big skookum he-wolf, all right, of the crookedest and saltiest outfit this section of Texas has ever knowed. And he's got what most tough owl-hoot jiggers ain't got—he's got brains!

"Oh, I know yuh're salty, and yuh ain't no snide yoreself when it comes to thinkin' straight and fast. But yuh're by yoreself, Walt, exceptin' for a lotta pore peons and little ranchers and sheepmen and other folks who've had trouble all over Texas. And he's got a follerin', a big follerin', includin' fellers that are the political set-up in this county and those roundabout.

"I heard tell Brandon was able to pull enough wires over to the capital to keep the Rangers away from here after some of the decent folks had sent to Captain McNelty askin' for a troop, so's a square election would be held next month instead of a rigged-up affair to put Brandon's hand-picked slate inter office. Don't forget, he got Tate Quill elected sheriff and Tate eats out of his hand. And he put Judge Hawley on the bench, and sent Anse Garnett to the state senate.

"I tell yuh, Brandon's a force to be reckoned with, and he ain't got no heart, soul or conscience. And, listen—Brandon is on the prod proper for what yuh did to Ellis and Price last night. He's offerin' a reward for yuh, and he ain't specifyin' whether yuh come in on yore feet or on a shutter."

"Reward?" Slade looked a trifle more interested.

"Uh-huh. Five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars to have yuh brought into his office, on yore feet or otherwise. The word's bein' passed around now by Tate Quill and that hyderphobia skunk of a Trench Muller. I met Tate and Trench as I was headin' over here and they told me about it. They was just goin' over to the Ace-Full Saloon to eat. They'll pass the word around while they're there, and hand out a description. Muller knows yuh by sight."

El Halcon appeared to have heard only the first sentences of Doc's harangue. Anyway, they were the first sentences he repeated, in a thoughtful and interested voice:

"Five hundred dollars! Into his office!"

Turning, he glanced up the slope toward where the gaunt buildings of the Brandon mines bulked big in the deepening twilight. From a smaller building set a little apart, a single window glowed golden. Slade's gaze centered on it.

"Reckon that lighted room is Brandon's office, ain't it?" he remarked. "Wonder if he's alone?"

"Chances are he is, at this time of evenin'," Doc grunted, "but he won't be long. Trench Muller is always right at his heels. Trench won't take long to eat, and he'll be hustlin' right up there as soon as he's finished. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering," Slade replied. "Well, Doc, I got a little chore to attend to. See yuh later."

"Yuh're not pullin' out as I advised?"

Slade smiled down at him with a quirking of the corners of his rather wide mouth. But it was a smile of the lips only, for his gray eyes were as cold as a winter wind across frozen snow.

"Shadow, my hoss, is sorta tired after his trip up here from the Big Bend," he replied. "So long, Doc."

He strode off up a side street, leaving the old doctor shaking his

head and staring after his tall, lithe form.

"Shore is well-named," muttered Doc Beard. *"El Halcon!* Uh-huh, he's just like one of them big glitter-eyed hellions of the mountains, the kind that stand up to a eagle if needs be, and ain't scared to swoop down and snatch a wolf's kill from right under his smeller. Now I wonder what he's up to?"

Which last somewhat paralleled the question Cale Brandon asked himself only a few minutes later when a tall form sauntered into his office without knocking, closed the door softly and stood gazing speculatively at the mine owner.

"Well?" barked Brandon. "Who are you, and what's the idea of walkin' in here like yuh owned the place?"

"Sorry," Walt Slade answered the second part of the question, "but I was sorta lookin' for a gent called Brandon."

"Well, yuh've found him," Brandon replied truculently. "What yuh want?"

"A chance to earn five hundred *pesos,*" Slade answered.

"Huh? What's that?"

Slade fumbled the makings from a shirt pocket and proceeded deftly to roll a cigarette with the fingers of his left hand.

"Hear tell yuh're offerin' a reward of five hundred to have a jigger brought in here," he said. "Well, I can use the five hundred, and I can produce the feller yuh want to see."

Brandon glared at the speaker, but interest was supplanting the anger in his hot blue eyes.

"So yuh were talkin' with Quill and Muller, eh? And yuh think yuh can bring *El Halcon* in? How do I know yuh're not just makin' big medicine?"

"How do I know you got the five hundred to hand out if I do bring him in?" Slade instantly countered.

With a growl, Brandon jerked open the desk drawer and hauled out a clinking bag.

"Here's the five hundred," he said. "Bring in that hombre and it's yores. But wait," he added suspiciously, star-

Chuck Hardin, Texas Cowpoke on One of the Largest Cattle Ranches of the World—in Hawaii—Battles Japanese Raiders and Saboteurs With Frontier Tactics

IN

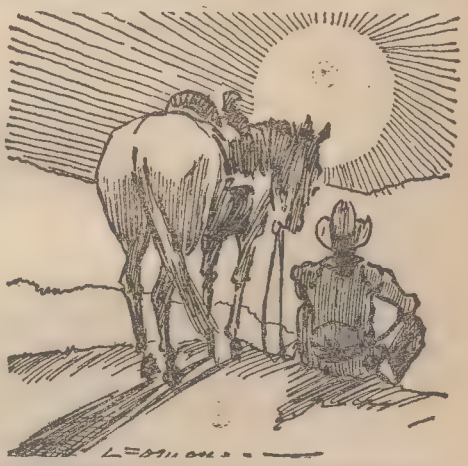
THE SUN RISES WEST

A Smashing Action Novelet

By

OSCAR J. FRIEND

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE



ing at Slade, "how am I goin' to know it's *El Halcon* yuh're bringin' in, if yuh do bring him in? I ain't never laid eyes on the killin' lobo."

"Yore man, Muller, says he knows him," Slade suggested. "Is that right?"

"Uh-huh," Brandon agreed. "Trench will be here any minute, now."

Slade lighted his cigarette and drew in a satisfying lungful of smoke.

"I'll wait," he announced, adding with a meaning that passed over Brandon's head, "I've a notion he'll be sorta surprised to see me here so soon."

Brandon grunted, and slid the gold back into the drawer. He did not offer his visitor a chair, but sat glowering at the desk top, upon which rested his huge left hand. His right hand was out of sight, Slade noted.

It was Slade, lounging easily in front of the desk, who first heard the thud of approaching footsteps. An instant later, Brandon cocked his head sideward as boots clattered on the porch.

Slade still stood where he was, his lean profile toward the door, but blurred by shadow.

The door opened and a man stood blinking at the light.

"Come in, Trench," growled Brandon. "Here's a feller that says he can produce *El Halcon*."

With a grunt, Trench Muller entered the room, closing the door behind him, and peering uncertainly at the dimly seen face of the man towering over the desk lamp. With lithe grace, Slade reached out a long arm and deftly tipped the light to better advantage.

"Think I can make good, Muller?" he asked in his musical, drawling voice.

For an astounded instant Trench Muller stared, seemingly paralyzed, incapable of action. The cigarette he was smoking fell from sagging lips. Then his right hand blurred to his gun in a move too swift for the eye to follow. The room rocked and roared to a booming report.

Trench Muller was fast, plenty fast. He had a reputation from Oklahoma to the Rio Grande. But before the blinding speed of *El Halcon's* draw, his own seemed slow and awkward. His gun had barely cleared leather when it was knocked spinning from his hand—and half of Muller's finger with it—by a slug from Slade's Colt.

Slade went backward half-across the room, like a flickering shadow, and even as the smoke wisped from his gun muzzle, the front boards of Brandon's desk were splintered and rent in gushing flame. The windows danced to the crashing double report of a sawed-off shotgun. Had Slade remained in front of the desk, the upward ranging buckshot charges would have blown him in two.

As Muller reeled back, howling curses and clutching at his blood-spouting hand, Brandon went for his shoulder holster. With the draw half-completed, he stiffened to stone, staring at the rock-steady black muzzle of Slade's left-hand gun, which was lined with his broad chest.

Slade spoke softly, but with steel razor-edging his voice:

"Hands on the table, both of them, yuh fangin' sidewinder! Up to the desk, Muller. Yuh'll lose more'n a finger next time. Now stand there!"

CHAPTER III

Killer's Plot

FOR a moment Walt Slade poised motionless, listening intently for indications that the shots had been heard outside the office. But he quickly realized that the ceaseless thunder of the stamps dulled the ears of the night-shift to all other sounds.

Deftly he removed the gun from Brandon's holster and tossed it alongside Muller's shattered six. Then he

stepped back and regarded the pair from cold gray eyes. His sensitive nostrils quivered slightly and the eyes narrowed the merest trifle as they focused on Muller.

"Five hundred *pesos* for *El Halcon* to be in this office, eh?" he remarked in pleasantly conversational tones. "Well, he's here. Pay up, Brandon!"

Cale Brandon's neck swelled until it threatened to burst his collar. His face was gorged with blood, the veins at his temples standing out like cords. For a moment he choked in his throat. Then words came forth, thickly, hoarsely.

"Do yuh think yuh can get away with this, blast yuh?"

"Worth trying," said Slade. "Haul out that sack and lay it on the tabletop. If there's a hogleg in that drawer, better leave it right where it is, and don't try to slip shells into that scattergun yuh got clamped under the desk so's it'll shoot through the front of it. Yuh made yore bargain, Brandon. Live up to it—and live *longer!*"

Brandon's huge hands balled into anger-trembling fists, but under the deadly threat of those cold eyes he slowly—slowly and carefully—opened the drawer and drew forth the clinking sack of gold. Slade sheathed one gun, seized the sack and thrust it into the front of his shirt. Then, his icy gaze never leaving the two men at the desk, he backed slowly to the door, paused, eyed them speculatively for an instant, his thumb softly caressing the milled hammer of the cocked .45. And under that speculative, appraising glance, the color drained from Trench Muller's face, leaving it waxen beneath its swarthiness. Brandon tensed, and wet his suddenly dry lips with its tongue.

But the Hawk's thumb slid off the gun-hammer and he spoke, his voice still soft and musical.

"Better stay put for a spell, gents. It's dark outside and yuh'd be against the light. *Adios!*"

The door opened, closed softly.

With the click of the latch, Cale Brandon dived for the gun on the floor. But Muller seized him with his bloody hands and wrested him away from it.

"Don't, Boss—don't try it!" he panted hoarsely. "That hombre's a killer! Yuh wouldn't have a chance. I wouldn't have believed the man lived who could shade my draw thataway. And he's just steel and ice. Did yuh see he never stopped smokin'. That cigarette hung to his lip all the time. Wait! There's better ways."

Brandon raved curses, but the wrath in his eyes changed to crafty exultation. He permitted Muller to lead him back to the desk.

"We've got him now!" he exclaimed, thudding into his chair and hammering the desk top. "Now Quill's got a charge he can put agin the fangin' rattlesnake. Armed robbery! We'll get a posse and run him down all legal and aboveboard."

BUT again the cooler Muller shook his head.

"Yuh can't do it, Boss," he disagreed. "Don't yuh see yuh can't? Look how the yarn would sound: Yuh offer a reward for *El Halcon* to be brought in. *El Halcon* shows up, claims the reward for bringin' in hisself, and walks out with it. Yuh'd be the laughin' stock of every town and cow camp in Texas, and bein' laughed at is the one thing yuh can't afford. Election Day is right on top of us and there's plenty of opposition as it is. This would tangle yore twine for fair.

"This whole business has got to be handled mighty gentle and smart. Plenty of folks is on the prod against us. We don't want a Ranger troop over here 'fore election. Yeah, I know yuh pulled wires at the capital and held off old Cap McNelty when he was for sendin' men here, by makin' out there was nothin' here the local authorities couldn't handle. But there's a limit, Boss, there's a limit."

The word "Ranger" affected Cale Brandon as a red flag is supposed to affect a bull. His face purpled, his eyes spat blue flame. He hammered the desk-top with a blacksmith's blows. His lips writhed back to expose his teeth in a wolfish grimace.

"The time's comin' when I'll have that whole danged outfit hogtied, or run clean off the range!" he rasped.

"Uh-huh," Muller agreed. "But that time ain't yet. What we got to figger on now is gettin' Lyman Hull elected senator from this district. Then, with what we already got over to the capital, we'll be settin' purty. But about this here *El Halcon* . . . Listen! I got a plan."

Brandon glanced up, expectant. Muller paused to finish bandaging his mutilated finger with strips torn from a handkerchief. He took the bottle of whiskey which Brandon produced from a drawer and doused the bandaged member liberally with the fiery liquor. He cursed and groaned at the burn of it on the raw flesh, but after a moment the pain subsided somewhat.

He drew a chair close to Brandon's then, and began to speak in low tones. And as he spoke the rage left Brandon's eyes and was supplanted by a hot glow of devilish anticipation. He licked his bearded lips as a wolf might lick his chops at the sight of a crippled dogie. Before Muller had finished, he began, with rasping throaty chuckles, to unclamp the sawed-off shotgun from beneath his desk-top.

"Get Ralpho and Little Egg," he ordered.

Muller left the room, to return shortly with two men shambling at his heels. One was tall, much bowed in the shoulders; the other short and wiry. Their swarthy faces and high cheek-bones hinted at Indian blood.

There was another characteristic common to both—the eye pupils of each were enormously dilated.

Cale Brandon glanced at those dilated pupils and at the twitching hands of the pair, and smiled thinly. From the desk drawer he took a couple of cigarettes, plumper than the brain tablet Walt Slade had manufactured with his bronzed fingers. He held them toward the two men.

"Have a smoke, boys," he offered.

The men seized the cigarettes avidly, lighted them with trembling fingers, drew deep lungfuls of smoke. For minutes they continued to puff, swallowing the smoke, holding it as long as possible and then letting it trickle from their nostrils in straggly wisps. Cale Brandon watched them in silence, still wearing his wolfish grin.

CASUALLY, carelessly, he laid several more of the plump cigarettes on the table, noting how the eyes of the pair followed his every move. He noticed, too, that the dilated pupils of those eyes had now contracted to pin-point size. Finally he motioned to chairs ranged against the wall.

"Draw up," he said. "Let's have a little gabfest."

Ten minutes later the unsavory pair left the room, the tall one concealing something under his coat. The hands of neither shook now and the pupils of their glowing eyes were so small as to be indiscernible.

In the office that Ralpho and "Little Egg" had just quitted, Brandon and Trench Muller exchanged glances pregnant with evil satisfaction. . . .

When Walt Slade had closed the door of Brandon's office, he had moved swiftly.

He slewed sideward around the corner of the building and plunged into the deeper shadow. He had scant fear that the cautious Muller, or even the more impetuous Brandon would risk pursuit in the darkness, but he was taking no chances.

For a moment he stood listening for the office door to open, but when it remained closed he noiselessly glided down the slope and gained the streets of the town. Soon he was entering Doc Beard's little office. Doc glanced

up from the table at which he was working.

"Well?" he remarked expectantly.

Slade fumbled inside his shirt, drew forth the clinking bag and poured a stream of gold pieces onto the table. Doc Beard stared at the yellow flood with dilated eyes.

"Been robbin' the bank, eh?" he grunted. "Are they after yuh close?"

Slade grinned, and fingered a shiny double eagle.

"Figger there's plenty there to take care of an operation for Rosa Garcia, eh?" he asked.

Doc Beard glanced up at the tall, black-haired man with the gray eyes that were now as warm and sunny as summer seas. His own filmy old eyes were moist. He swallowed twice before he could speak.

"But—but where in all get-out did yuh get it?" he demanded harshly.

Slade's grin broadened, became a musical chuckle.

"Cale Brandon give it to me," he replied.

Doc Beard glared at him, and snorted like a bull pawing dust over his back.

"What the devil *you* tryin' to give *me?*" he bawled. "Cale Brandon handin' out five hundred dollars! Where'd this money come from? I want to know!"

Slade's chuckle broke into a ringing laugh. He patted the old doctor's thin shoulder.

"Hope to die and swaller fishhooks, it's true!" he declared. "Cale Brandon took it out of his desk drawer and give it to me."

Doc was still incredulous.

"Yuh mean yuh took it from him," he corrected suspiciously.

"If I'd took it from him, wouldn't he be bawlin' to the sheriff right now to get it back?" Slade instantly countered. "Run over to Quill's office and see if any complaint has come in. If there has, you can take that *dinero* and hand it right back to Brandon. Otherwise, I want yuh to take Rosa Garcia to the hospital soon as yuh can arrange it. *Adios,* Doc!"

BEFORE the amazed man of medicine could sputter another question, the tall form of *El Halcon* vanished into the outer dark. Wordless, shaking his white head in utter bewilderment, Doc Beard gathered up the gold pieces and replaced them in the sack. He drew the pucker string tight and sat staring at the plump pouch.

"The good Lord has funny ways of gettin' things done sometimes," he mused aloud, "but His meanin' is always purty plain. I reckon He don't intend for Rosa Garcia to cash in just yet. And," he added as an afterthought, his thoughts reverting to the reckless, laughing-eyed cowboy who had just left his office, "one thing is

[*Turn page*]

shore—He knows how to pick His helpers!"

After leaving the doctor's office, Slade repaired to a nearby restaurant and enjoyed a leisurely meal. From there he went to the big saloon, the Ace-full.

There was a goodly crowd in the place, which was awhirl with words. But as the tall form of *El Halcon* passed through the swinging doors the conversation abruptly fell flat. Bartenders glanced around nervously, dealers at the poker tables shuffled the cards unduly long. Covert glances shot from beneath hat-brims. And from the dance floor, more than one pair of bright eyes gazed with frank admiration.

Apparently oblivious to the sensation his entrance had created, Slade sauntered leisurely to the bar and ordered a drink. Talk began again, although obviously in a lower key and with more careful choosing of words. To the Hawk's keen ears came fragments of conversation.

"It's the feller that curried and rubbed down Sam Price and that tinhorn Ellis last night," he heard a youthful cowboy mumble to his companion, a touch of awe in his voice.

The man to whom he spoke, an oldster with washed-out blue eyes and hands that were never far from his gun-belt, nodded soberly, and refrained from comment.

"They tell me Cale Brandon is a heap put out over Price," the young cowboy continued in low tones. "Me, I wouldn't want to be in that feller's boots when Wolf-man Brandon gets through with him. There's liable to be some mighty prime man-tamin' hereabouts 'fore Brandon is finished."

The oldster spoke then.

"Mebbe," he said. "But I've a hunch that when the last steer is druv, that big feller's boots will still be walkin' around with him in 'em. Yuh always goin'-to be a looney, Clint?"

The young puncher flushed at the scorn of the older man's voice. But arguing with an elderly gent with eleven notches cut in the handle of his old single-action Smith & Wesson .44 was sometimes unhealthy, the young cowboy remembered. He didn't argue.

CHAPTER IV

Death Strikes

SLADE, standing at the bar, speculated the crowd in the saloon. He saw colorfully-garbed cowboys rubbing shoulders with brawny miners in red or blue woolen shirts and muddy boots. There was a sprinkling of Mexicans in black velvet and much silver.

Walt Slade eyed them thoughtfully. He knew that this country boasted a large American-born Mexican population; but the citizens of Mexican extraction here, as in El Paso County farther to the west and south, were mostly farmers, peons who worked in the mines or in the towns, or riders on the big cattle ranches to the north and east.

They did not, as a rule, wear velvet pantaloons, short velvet jackets trimmed with silver conchas, or ornate sombreros encrusted with silver braid. Patched overalls and floppy straw hats were more likely to comprise their wardrobe.

"From below the Line," he mused to himself, apropos of the swarthy, hard-eyed gamblers and drinkers. "Wonder what they're doing way up here, and well-heeled with *dinero?* Salty-looking gents, too."

The bartender who served Slade was a loquacious individual who regarded the Hawk with unconcealed admiration.

"Didn't figger yuh'd show up here again after the ruckus last night," he remarked frankly. "Hombres that have a run-in with one of Wolf-man Brandon's men usually sift sand outa the country pronto."

"Mebbe I don't know Brandon well

enough," Slade suggested, sipping his drink.

"Mebbe," the bartender admitted, adding dryly, "but I got a hunch it wouldn't make any difference if yuh did. Here, have one on the house."

As he poured the drink, Slade adroitly changed the subject.

"Quite a few Mexican fellers here tonight."

The barkeep nodded. "Yeah, they drop in every now and then. Don't stay over long, and drop right outa sight again."

"Live hereabouts?"

The drink juggler shook his head decidedly.

"Nope, not them dudes. They're from the other side of the River, or I'm a heap mistook. Reckon their business on this side the Line wouldn't bear over much investigatin', whatever it is. Leavin'?"

"Yeah," Slade replied. "Didn't get hardly any shut-eye last night, after a hard and long ride. Figger on poundin' my ear for a hefty spell tonight."

"Good idea," agreed the drink juggler. "Wish I could myself."

The little livery stable where Slade had hired a room over the stalls which accommodated his big black horse, Shadow, was but a short distance from the saloon, up a dark alley. When he left the saloon, he went straight to the stable.

HE opened the door, closed it behind him, and approached the stalls near the foot of the ramshackle stairs. A lantern, hung by a nail, burned smokily at the head of the stairs and cast its feeble beams along the corridor upon which opened his room and another occupied by old "Bunt" Walsh, the stable-keeper.

Suddenly he paused, his nose wrinkling slightly, and sniffed. To his sensitive nostrils had come an unpleasant odor, slightly reminiscent of burned cheese. It was an odor that he recognized, and one that he had good reason to detest.

For a tense moment Slade stood motionless, his eyes flickering from stalls to shadowy corners, to the dark space under the stairs, to the little window over the feed bins. He listened intently, straining his ears for the slightest sound other than the measured breathing, or the occasional stamp of the two or three horses stalled in the stable at the time. He relaxed a trifle, moved carelessly to the nearest stall without any effort toward quiet.

"Hiyuh, old-timer," he greeted his own big black who pricked eager ears and snorted a greeting.

He tweaked the magnificent horse's velvety nose and Shadow bared gleaming teeth white as milk, laid back his ears, and pretended vast indignation. Slade patted his neck, and continued to talk in jocosely affectionate terms. But all the time his ears were straining, his eyes searching every nook and corner of the shadowy room.

He sniffed again, his nostrils tingling to the unpleasantly pungent odor. It was faint, elusive, but persistent.

"Yuh're nervous as a cat, too," he muttered to the horse. "I shore wish yuh could talk!"

He was silent for a moment after that, and the horse seemed also to assume an attitude of listening.

Slade heard something then. And at the same instant Shadow cocked his head sideward and laid back one ear. Slade glanced upward speculatively. It had been the tiniest of sounds, such as might be made by a rat somewhere amid the rafters, or by the old stable-keeper turning on his bed in the upper room farther down the corridor. And *might* have been the faint creak of a board freed of the weight of a cautiously shifted foot.

His lips tightening, Slade glanced swiftly about. His eye fixed on some lengths of binding twine dangling from a nearby peg. He stretched out a long arm and secured one of the cords. With deft fingers he fashioned a run-

ning noose at one end. Then, planting his feet solidly, he leisurely ascended the stairs, his keen eyes never leaving the door of his room at their head, his right hand hovering over the black butt of a holstered Colt.

He reached the head of the stairs, took a long stride that sent him past the door and brought up on noiselessly planted feet.

The door which opened outward had an old-fashioned lift-latch secured to its inner surface and operated from the outside by a lever extending through the thickness of the wood. Over this lever Slade deftly looped the noosed twine. Standing well to one side, he lifted the latch by means of the twine and jerked the door wide open.

Cr-r-rash!

Flame gushed from the dark room. Double charges of buckshot stormed through the doorway and ripped the flimsy wallboards to splinters. By the blaze of the shotgun, Slade caught sight of two shadowy forms in the darkness of his room.

With a rattling roar, both of *El Halcon's* Colts let go. There was a shrill yell inside the room, a yell that ended in a gurgling mutter and the thud of a falling body. Flame lanced through the smoke and Slade felt the icy breath of a passing slug.

He shot at the flash of the gun, heard a choking grunt, and fired once more. There was another thud, then a queer nervous tapping on the floorboards, like the twitching efforts of boot heels that strove to run and could not.

CROUCHING well away from the doorway, with smoke wisping thinly from the black muzzles of his guns, Walt Slade, the Hawk, strained his ears for sound inside the room. In the stable below the frightened horses stamped and snorted, and from the closed room of the stable-keeper, farther down the corridor, came a muffled thrashing and grunting. But the dark rectangle of the open door framed utter silence.

Still wary, Slade holstered one gun and fumbled a match from his pocket. He struck it, held the flaring flame high. By its feeble beams he could see two sprawled forms on the floor inside the room. They were without sound or motion and the distorted limbs told a story with grim finality.

Slade hesitated no longer. He holstered his second Colt, jerked the lantern from its nail and entered the room. A single close glance told him that both drygulchers were satisfactorily dead. Without stopping for further examination, he hurried to the stable-keeper's door, shoved it open and entered.

By the lantern's beams he could see the old man thrashing about on his bed. He was gagged and bound and his face was smeared with blood that oozed from a gash over one eye. Slade's knife ripped the cords and severed the knotted handkerchief that held the gag in place.

A sputter of profanity followed the gag the keeper spat out. He sat up, pawing at his wounded head, mouthing incoherently.

"What in blazes happened to you?" Slade demanded.

"How in all tarnation do I know?" bawled the oldster. "Some double-dyed coyote come up here and knocked on the door. When I opened it, he clouted me over the head with a gun-barrel or somethin'. When I come to a minute ago somebody was shootin' up the diggin's and I was hogtied. That's all I know. What the eternal fire is goin' on here, anyhow?"

Slade helped him to his feet, examined the head wound with deft fingers, decided it was superficial and bandaged it with a handkerchief. Tersely he recounted what had happened, and together they investigated the other room.

"Huh!" grunted old Bunt Walsh, as he turned the smaller of the two dead men onto his back and peered into his

distorted face. "Huh! I've seed this here hombre hangin' around shady oiler red-eye mills. Heard him called Little Egg. And this other one—Ralpho, that's his monicker. He was most always with Little Egg. They worked in the mines now and then, to get enough *dinero* to buy *tequila*. Shiftless horned toads. What in blazes were they tryin' to drygulch you for?"

Slade did not answer. He was squatting beside the taller of the dead men. He leaned close, his nostrils quivering slightly.

Old Bunt Walsh caught the pungent whiff also. His nose wrinkled and he sniffed sharply.

"Smells like burnt stale bread or somethin' like that," he growled. "What is it, feller?"

"Marihuana," Slade tersely replied. "They've both been smoking marihuana cigarettes. I smelled it when I came into the stable downstairs. Thought it was funny."

"Huh!" grunted Walsh. "Loco weed, eh?"

"That's what some call it," Slade admitted.

A sudden thought struck him and he stripped back the sleeve from the dead man's left arm. The arm was covered with pock marks, some minute, others as if from badly-healed ulcers.

There were also fresh wounds in the flesh, their edges angry, puckered. Slade gestured to them.

"Used morphine, too," he said. "Most weed smokers do. All narcotic users come to it sooner or later. This feller had been getting it regularly, all he wanted. Some of them needle punctures was made recent. How about the other hombre's arm?" He took a look. "Uh-huh, I thought so. Both were addicts."

HIS glance roved about the room, fixed on something lying on the floor. He retrieved the object and held it to the light. It was a necktie of the black string variety, torn half-across. Old Walsh peered at it.

"Gambler's tie," he grunted. "The kind dealers and tinhorns almost always wear. What in blazes was these two bar-flies doing with that?" He stared thoughtfully at Slade with his rheumy old eyes, his forehead suddenly puckering. "Say!" he exclaimed. "Didn't you have a run-in with some gamblers last night? I heard about it over to the Ace-full. Uh-huh, and gamblers stick together. But, heck, these sidewinders ain't gamblers."

Slade smoothed the torn tie with slim fingers.

"But suppose I'd been found cashed in here on the floor with this string in my hand," he remarked softly. "With it torn most in two, like it had been jerked from a jigger's neck in the course of a ruckus?"

Old Walsh smote the floor with his fist. "By cracky, yuh're right!" he exclaimed excitedly. "That would shore make it look like yuh'd had another set-to with the gamblers and got the worst of it. Yeah, gamblers always stick together and usually try to even things up for each other. Feller, yuh've hit it! But I'm sayin' again these fellers shore wasn't gamblers. Somebody that wanted to make it look like the work of gamblers sicked 'em on you. Who?"

Slade did not answer the question. He stood up, gazed steadily into the old stable-keeper's rugged, honest face.

"I reckon," he said softly, "that these jiggers came here to steal the hosses, and threw down on me when I happened in on them."

Bunt Walsh stared, his jaw sagging slightly. Then his mouth snapped shut with rat-trap tightness. He nodded his understanding.

"Mebbe," he agreed. "Yeah, I got a notion that's right. But just the same, a feller knowed as *El Halcon* had oughta fork his big black cayuse and ride outa this section pronto. Cale Brandon runs this end of Texas!"

"Let's go over and let Doc Beard take a look at that head of yores," Slade suggested.

Bunt Walsh nodded. "Not a bad notion. She aches like blazes. Besides, Doc is coroner and had oughta know about all this here before anybody else. Yuh know Doc purty well, don't yuh?"

Doc Beard was still up when they reached his place, and his comments were pungent, profane and large in number.

"I'll impanel a jury first thing in the mornin'," he concluded. "Nope, there ain't no need to wake up Tate Quill this time of night, if he's asleep. Let him wait till mornin', too. You can sleep in my spare room tonight, Slade. . . . Hold still, Bunt, I'm just pourin' arnica on this scratch. It don't hurt."

After the stable-keeper, bandaged and redolent of liniment had departed, Slade asked the doctor a question.

"Morphine?" grunted Doc Beard. "Anybody in this section that needs morphine would have to come to me to get it.

"There ain't no regular drug store hereabouts. I sell all the medicine that don't come from mail-order houses, and yuh can't buy morphine from a mail-order house. And a feller shore would have to have bad need of it to get any from me. There's a law coverin' the sale of habit-formin' drugs. Why?"

Slade told him of the telltale marks on the arms of the dead men. Old Doc swore sharply.

"Somebody's peddlin' the stuff hereabouts, then," he declared, "and that means somebody's smugglin' it up from Mexico. Slade, this has got to be stopped!"

The Hawk nodded soberly.

"I figger a number of things goin' on in this section have got to be stopped," he replied enigmatically. Then he sought his bed for a few hours of rest.

CHAPTER V

Doublecrossed

THE verdict of the coroner's jury was terse and to the point.

"Self-defense. The killers had it coming. Lucky they got stopped in time. The gent who did it had oughta have a medal."

Sheriff Quill, indignant at not being informed earlier of the double killing, attempted a protest, mumbling something about it not being right for folks to take the law into their own hands. They should call the regularly elected officers.

"Sorry, Sheriff," Slade told him, "but a sawed-off shotgun talks so loud I was afraid I couldn't make yuh hear if I hollered."

The jury chuckled. The sheriff tugged his mustache fiercely, and changed the subject.

"Where is that sawed-off, by the way?" he demanded. "I'll just take charge of it along with these bodies and the other truck."

But strange to say, the wicked weapon had vanished and could not be found.

"It was an ordinary appearing scattergun," Slade told Doc Beard, "except that there was a mark on the stock as if an iron band had been clamped tight around it."

Slade spent the rest of the morning helping Doc get Rosa Garcia ready for the trip to the hospital. Finally the carefully prepared wagon rolled away, bearing the patient, her husband, Manuel, and a capable Mexican midwife for whose services Doc had arranged. Old Teresa, the grandmother, remained behind to care for the babies.

"That midwife is a first-class practical nurse," Doc told Slade. "She can do everything that's needful. There was no real need for me to go along, and besides, I'm mighty apt to be needed here most any time. There's

always somebody gettin' busted up at the mine, or punctured in one of these red-eye swillin's here in town. Speakin' of the mines, Manuel told all the oilers who work there what yuh did for him and Rosa, and the news shore is gettin' around. I reckon yuh could be elected governor next week, if them fellers and the little ranchers and farmers had anything to say about it."

"I've a notion they have enough votes among them to say a good deal," Slade remarked idly.

"Uh-huh—only they don't do any votin'," Doc grunted. "Them fellers never meddle in politics. They leave that for fellers like Cale Brandon and his outfit. Mackworth, who is runnin' against Lyman Hull for senator, tried hard to stir 'em up, but they just naturally don't show no interest. Besides, I reckon they don't hanker overmuch to get in bad with Brandon. Mackworth is a good man, too, and would fight to better their condition if he got to the capital."

Doc's prediction that he would be needed soon was borne out before the day was over. Just at dusk, a young Mexican rode reelingly into town, managed to swing down from the hull in front of Doc's office, and collapsed on the porch.

Doc and Walt Slade found him there some time afterward, his horse standing patiently beside the railing. They carried him inside and found that he had been shot through the chest. A deep, ragged furrow just above his left temple showed where a second bullet had narrowly missed taking his life.

DR. BEARD shook his head hopelessly as he treated and bandaged the wounds and administered a powerful hypodermic injection.

"Get set, Walt," he told the Hawk. "I've a notion he'll come out of it for a bit before he goes, and mebbe we can learn how this happened."

A little later the Mexican regained a dazed consciousness. He was not inclined to talk at first, but after his gaze had rested for a long moment upon Walt Slade's lean, hawklike face, his pain-misted eyes brightened and in painful gasps the story came forth. And it was the poignant story of how a Mexican of noble birth had, with his men, recently met tragedy that brought an ache to the hearts of the dying man's listeners.

Don Guilermo Telles, the wounded man told them haltingly, was a Mexican gentleman, descendant of the old grandees who, centuries before, had peopled the land and brought with them Old World ideas and customs. In Europe, many of these gentlemen, or their immediate ancestors had built castles at various crossroads and had levied tribute from all who passed that way. And, in this wild land under strange stars, many of them continued to levy tribute in one way or another from their fellows.

So it was not strange that Don Guilermo had somewhat unconventional notions concerning the law of the land in which he dwelt and the law of that other and even more unpredictable land to the north of the silvery River of the Palms. Hence Don Guilermo rode with serene conscience at the head of a long string of pack mules which threaded through a narrow and gloomy canyon to the north of the Rio Grande.

That the huge *aparejos,* or pack saddles, which burdened the mules were stuffed with silver 'dobe dollars upon which the eye of a Border inspector had never rested, and that other things which would have greatly interested inspectors were in those pack saddles, troubled him not at all. Elegant, graceful, alert, he rode at the head of his smuggling train, smiling now and then in anticipation of the profit the venture would bring.

On either side of the train paced outriders. They were lean, watchful men, armed with rifle, pistol and knife. Armed guards brought up the rear. The harness of the mules jingled

faintly. Their dainty hoofs *clupped* the hard surface of the trail; the crowding walls of the canyon flung back the echoes strangely slurred and jumbled. The sun was low in the west and the ragged rim of the canyon was ringed about with saffron flame.

Don Guilermo quickened his horse's pace. At no great distance ahead was the canyon mouth, as evinced by the lowering walls and the thinning of the growth upon the gorge floor. Soon the place of rendezvous would be reached and the transaction completed. Don Guilermo smiled again, relaxed comfortably in his saddle.

Around a shallow bend swept the train. The canyon mouth appeared, and the wide reaches of the rangeland beyond. The guards sighed their relief, thankful that Skull Canyon was behind them. There were too many sharp turns, too many clusters of chimney rock, too many clumps of dense growth in Skull Canyon for comfort.

IT WAS an ideal spot for an ambush, should the closely guarded secret of the train have come to the ears of certain gentlemen who lived precariously in this wild section. Such gentlemen would undoubtedly have taken a lively interest in the contents of the packs, the value of which was great. They might well have succumbed to temptation and lain in wait in Skull Canyon.

But now this was all over. Ahead was the open range, and the train was too strongly guarded to fear attack there. The Border inspectors and the ever-dreaded Rangers had been successfully eluded, they were confident, owing to peculiar conditions existing in this section at the moment. Owlhoots from the Guadalupes or the Pecos hills were all they feared.

Nevertheless, they did not unduly relax their vigilance. Keen eyes swept the canyon rim for unwonted movement; ears strained for possible sound.

With the unexpected abruptness of a mirage a mounted man appeared in the canyon mouth, a big man on a tall horse. The level light of the setting sun etched horse and rider in reddish flame. The man held up his hand in authoritative gesture.

"Halt!" he shouted imperiously in Spanish.

The man was alone. Insofar as the smugglers could see, he was unarmed; but they halted, in pure astonishment. Every eye was fixed on the swaggering figure atop the tall roan horse. Again he held up his hand. Again he shouted, his voice ringing between the rocky walls.

"Come on! Come on! What yuh waitin' for?"

Don Guilermo and his men stared in utter amazement.

"Loco!" was the muttered word that ran the length of the train.

The crazy man held their attention to the exclusion of all else. Held it so that they did not see the lines of grim figures rise up on the canyon rim, sunlight glinting on leveled gun-barrels.

The man in the canyon mouth wheeled his horse, dashed madly to the left and vanished. Along the ragged rim of the canyon ran a wavering line of flame. The rocks quaked and trembled to the roar of rifle fire.

Caught between these double rows of flaming rifles, the Mexicans never had a chance. Don Guilermo and half his men died at that first withering volley. Horses were hit, and mules, and these, plunging and squealing with pain, added their terror to the awful confusion.

The guards and outriders were brave men and tried to fight back; but they could not shoot with any accuracy from atop their maddened mounts. One by one they fell, dead or mortally wounded. And as the wounded lay writhing on the ground, the riflemen sheltered among the rocks sent finishing bullets into their bodies.

Finally all lay without sound or motion. A few minutes later mounted

men rode into the canyon. They rounded up the frightened mules, transferred to horses the loads of those that had been killed and, as the last light faded in the western sky, swept from the canyon and headed north, driving the loads of silver, and other things, before them.

Hours passed, a late moon rose, climbed high into the star-strewn sky, poured questing beams of silver light into the ghastly gorge of death. White faces glared upward with unseeing eyes. A lonely, overlooked horse whinneyed plaintively into the night.

Suddenly in the moon-drenched canyon was movement. A gruesome, blood-smeared heap of dead rolled and tumbled, and from the midst of the mound of death an awful figure lurched drunkenly erect, glared about, saw the forgotten horse standing with trailing bridle and forward-pricked ears. Painfully, slowly, the desperately wounded man who had been left for dead beneath the bodies of his fellows crept toward the horse.

The animal snorted and drew back, but a trembling voice soothed it, a bloody hand seized the reins. With terrible effort the man dragged his broken body into the saddle, turned the horse's head and rode from the canyon of death as the first pale streaks in the east told of the coming dawn.

"All day I ride," the young Mexican finished his story for Doc Beard and Walt Slade. "Once I fall from saddle, lie for many hours. I come—town—"

Blood gurgled in his throat, and he coughed with horrible retchings.

"Who did it, feller?" Walt Slade urged, bending close. "Did yuh get a look at any of 'em?"

With a mighty effort the dying man roused, his lips writhed back from blood-smeared teeth.

"Hombre on *caballo*—" he panted.

"Yes, yes," Slade urged. "Who was the man on the hoss?"

Another appalling fit of coughing choked the Mexican's voice. He choked, gasped, panted forth three words:

"De dos caras!"

Blood gushed from his mouth. His chest arched, swelled to bursting, sank quickly, and did not rise again.

"Done for," Slade said quietly, straightening up.

Old Doc swore in a brittle voice.

"What'd he mean by that last gabble?" he asked.

"'*De dos caras*' taken literally means double-faced," Slade replied. "A free translation would come nearer to what he meant, I figger, and a free translation would be doublecrossed!"

"Interestin'," grunted Doc.

Slade nodded, then gestured toward the dead man's bare arm.

"And that's still more interesting," he remarked, his voice flat.

Doc Beard swore again, gloomily this time. The dead man's arm was covered with tiny scars and puckers.

CHAPTER VI

El Halcon Rides Again

MUCH of the early night Walt Slade spent visiting in the humble 'dobes of the Mexican quarter, talking earnestly with the men who worked in the mines or performed menial tasks in and about the establishments of the town. It was well after midnight when he again repaired to Doc Beard's office.

Doc had a visitor, a sturdily erect little man with a bright, straight-forward gaze. His clothes were powdered with dust and he showed other signs of being just in from a long and hard ride.

"Slade, I want yuh to know Tip Walker, deputy sheriff," Doc introduced. "He's the feller I told yuh about when yuh wanted to know if there was a square-shootin' peace officer in this section."

Walker shook hands with a firm

grip. He listened in silence while Slade talked in his drawling, musical voice. After the Hawk had finished, "Tip" Walker cast an inquiring glance at Doc Beard, who nodded his white head vigorously.

"All right," Walker told the Hawk. "It shore sounds like a loco notion to me, and I reckon it'll get me laughed at plenty, but I'll do it. I ain't never knowed Doc here to be wrong about a gent yet, and I'm takin' his word on it this time."

Slade stood up and, from his great height, smiled down at the little deputy.

"I think yuh'll find Doc is right this time, too," he said quietly. "As I understand it, yuh're on the way out anyhow, havin' got in bad with Brandon so yuh haven't got anything to lose, and mebbe quite a bit to gain. *Adios.*"

Tip Walker did get laughed at plenty the following day. Some of the more light-minded in Tortuga showed a tendency to become hysterical when he announced his belated candidacy for sheriff of the county, in opposition to the incumbent—his boss, Sheriff Tate Quill.

Walt Slade did not hear the laughter. In the gray light of dawn he rode out of Tortuga, astride his tall black horse. Secured by a thong across his broad shoulders he bore a small guitar in a waterproof case, and as he passed through the Mexican quarter on the outskirts of the town, he sang softly, in a voice that hushed the night wind and seemed to draw the very stars nearer earth to hear the better, a love song of Old Spain.

"Ai," said an old Mexican who awoke from his slumbers and raised his head to listen, "eet ees *El Halcon* who rides again! *Ai,* he sings. Soon some evil one will weep!"

Throughout the day Slade rode, and the next and the next. He paused many times in the course of his long ride over more than one wide-flung Texas county—paused at little ranches wherein lived dark men with smooth faces, or bearded men whose skin had once been fair but who were now bronzed almost as dark as the American-Mexicans; paused at lonely sheep camps where Texan herders and Mexican *pastors* greeted him gladly and listened to his songs and his talk; paused at small alfalfa farms; paused where men had banded together to work profitable claims.

And always, after these brief visits, other riders set out, on scrawny horses, on bad-tempered mules, on hypocritically docile burros—riders who in turn paused at lonely camp or ranch or grazing ground. And always these messengers, after delivering the message and explaining what was to be done, drove home their arguments and made them final with the words: *"El Halcon* asks it!"

BACK in Tortuga, when the news got around about Tip Walker's aspirations to be sheriff, nobody laughed louder than did Cale Brandon as he sat in his office conferring with Lyman Hull, his candidate for state senator, the man he was grooming for governor in the near future.

Lyman Hull was a big, heavy-faced man with blue-shaven jowls and eyes that were a trifle too close together. He had nicked teeth and a mouth the muscles of which could not quite keep in place. By dint of long practice his voice carried but a few feet when he spoke.

"Everythin' is goin' plumb smooth," Brandon assured the senatorial candidate. "The boys won't fail us. They know which side their bread's buttered on. Mackworth tried to line up the Mexican vote, but the oilers don't pay any attention to politics. Besides, lots of 'em work in the mines or the mill and *they* ain't lookin' for trouble, either. What of 'em do come to the poles will vote right, don't yuh worry.

"I've worked it careful and there won't be no funny business anybody can take exception to—just a plumb

orderly election with the *people* electin' their chosen representatives. Heck, I wouldn't even care if there were Rangers at the polls as some fellers like Doc Beard and his sort wanted 'em to be. I didn't even need to pull wires over to the capital and tie old Captain McNelty's hands."

"Just the same, we can do without Rangers in this section," Hull remarked with a meaning that was not lost on his hearer.

"Uh-huh," Brandon agreed. "And it won't be over long before we do away with that outfit altogether. You'll be in the governor's chair next time, Ly, and we'll have more men in the capital by then. It won't be hard. The State Police were got rid of back in the Seventies."

"But the State Police had it coming," Hull cautioned. "The Rangers are different. They have people behind them, which the State Police didn't. Build your fences tight, Cale, build 'em tight!"

Cale Brandon swore viciously. "Don't you be scared—I'll build 'em tight," he promised.

The way Cale Brandon "built his fences" was interesting. He had, in fact, built them for some years, during which years he had spread his power by such dubious methods over an amazing territory.

Cale was "building" when, some time before election, he pulled up in front of John Bowles' ranchhouse and waited for Bowles to come out. The Bowles spread was a good one and Bowles should be "settin' purty." But Bowles was an easy-going man with a soft heart. He hired more riders than he needed, and he couldn't bring himself to let them go during slack periods. Also, he was putting two boys through college, and he had bought more stock than he could afford to buy.

As a result, John Bowles was usually hard pressed for ready cash. He got the cash from Brandon and mortgaged his spread as security. He missed a payment or two, and even got behind with his interest.

In consequence, Bowles didn't feel so good when Brandon pulled up at his porch and sat silently in his buckboard, refusing with a shake of his head to come inside.

"I was goin' to drop in and see yuh tomorrer about them payments," Bowles broached the dread subject. 'Fraid I'll have to ask yuh to wait a little longer, Cale."

BRANDON apparently didn't hear. He asked a question, what sounded like an utterly irrelevant question:

"You and the boys goin' to be in town election day, John?"

"Why—why," replied Bowles, taken aback, "I hadn't figgered on it. We don't take much interest in politics out here, Cale."

Brandon nodded. "Thought yuh all might come in on election day," he said. "Well, reckon I'll be movin' on, John. Want to drop in on Lyman Hull over to his place. I'm sorta favorin' Lyman for state senator." He gathered up the reins, glanced at Bowles. "About them payments, John," he remarked. "I'm not in a hurry right now, but I *might* be about the fifth of next month."

With that he drove on, leaving Bowles staring after him.

Of course nobody could say that Cale Brandon was telling John Bowles to bring in his riders and vote for Lyman Hull or have his mortgage foreclosed. But just the same, the fifth of the month was the day after election.

Another interesting conversation ensued when Brandon, later in the day, paused before the big general store run by old Sime Peabody in Brazos. Sime bustled out, rubbing hands together in anticipation of a fat order.

But Brandon did not enter the store. Instead, he drew from his pocket a long list of articles Peabody

carried in stock and which were often needed at the Brandon Mine or ranch. He held the list so that Peabody could make out what it was.

"Liable to need a lot of things, not right now, but a little later," he remarked. "I'm on my way over to see Lyman Hull, the feller I sorta hope will win out for state senator, and ain't got time to talk business right now. Tell yuh what, Sime—drop in to see me when yuh come to town to vote on election day. Bring yore boys along, and fellers that trade with yuh, and we'll have a little gatherin' at the Ace-full while we talk business. Uh-huh, I've a notion I may need a lot of things about the fifth of next month."

He drove off, leaving Sime Peabody tugging at his broom-shaped beard and mentally going over a list of the folks who bought on credit and would be loath to refuse the storekeeper such a slight favor as to ride in town with him and vote for whoever they might be of a mind to.

SUCH was the system of "fence building" practiced by Brandon. Of course he did not own mortgages and trade in stores in all the counties surrounding his own. But his lieutenants did, and they bowed to Brandon as an overlord. Men Brandon favored got elected to county and state offices.

All this of course took money; but Brandon had money, and he kept making more. Chiefly from the big Brandon silver mine. Ceaselessly the ponderous stamps pulverized the ore in the Brandon mill; and with regularity, portly silver bricks were freighted under heavy guard to the railroad town for shipment. Other mines in the section paid a fair profit, but the Brandon lode was by far the richest yet tapped. Brandon shipped more metal than their combined output.

And so, having left no stone unturned, Brandon was in a complacent mood as he sat in his office listening to the thunder of the stamps after Lyman Hull, senator to be, had taken his departure. The door opened and Trench Muller, his hand still bandaged, sauntered in.

"Well," Brandon rumbled, "I understand that *El Halcon* horned toad trailed his rope outa this section. Reckon gettin' so nigh onto blowed in two the other night made him figger these diggin's were sorta unhealthy. It's a pity Little Egg and Ralpho bungled the job they did, though."

"Uh-huh," Muller agreed in pessimistic tones. "Cale, I shore wish that hombre hadn't got a look at that shotgun. And I figger I did a smart thing by havin' Juan Borajo sneak it outa the stable while nobody had a eye on it. Them clamp marks were almighty plain on the stock, and if a jigger like Tip Walker, for instance, happened to cast a eye on 'em, he might start puttin' two and two together and makin' more'n four of it. I ain't shore there won't be trouble over that yet. That darnation *El Halcon* has the kind of eyes that don't miss nothin'."

"Oh, stop yore croakin'," growled Brandon. "What difference does it make if a owlhoot like *El Halcon* did see and figger out that the scattergun came from here. *He* ain't runnin' to the law with what he knows."

"Nope," Muller admitted soberly, "but he has a reputation for makin' things almighty unpleasant for gents that try to do him in. Remember Doc Holloway, and that bankin' feller Crane? They tried to drop a tight loop on *El Halcon,* and they ain't with us no more."

"Forget it, Brandon jeered. "After Tuesday we won't have to do no worryin' about anything. We can take care of *El Halcon* or anybody else. . . . Who's that?"

A discreet rap had sounded on the outer door. It was repeated, and again. Muller went to the door and opened it. A lithe Mexican dressed

in black velvet adorned with silver conchas slipped into the room. His beady eyes snapped with excitement.

"Well, what yuh got on yore mind, Felipe?" Brandon demanded.

The Mexican drew close, lowered his voice and spoke with bated breath.

"A Santleblane wagon train from Chihuahua City for San Antonio," he informed. "It will follow the Chihuahua Trail. It bears a fortune in silver, *Capitan*—full three hundred and fifty thousand *pesos*, perhaps more."

Muller and Cale Brandon glared at each other with glistening eyes.

"Nearly half a million dollars!" Muller muttered, licking his thin lips. "But that outfit will be almighty well guarded, Boss."

"But they will molestation fear but little," put in the Mexican. "The secret it is guarded well. By the merest chance I learned it—from a senorita loved much by one of the guards, a one most foolish."

Brandon ran heavy fingers through his golden hair.

"When does it figger to cross the Pecos?" he asked.

"It should arrive at Horsehead Crossing late the evening of Thursday, if what I learned be true," the Mexican replied.

"They won't try the crossin' at night," Brandon muttered, "and they wouldn't camp at Horsehead Crossin', or I'm a heap mistook."

His brows drew together and for a few moments he sat lost in deep thought.

"Trench," he exclaimed suddenly, "I recollect that section well. This side the crossin' a few miles the trail cuts across a crik. The west bank of that crik is a mighty fine campin' site for a train. It's nigh onto shore they'll camp right there. It's open land for half a mile or more down the crik 'fore yuh come to trees and a canyon mouth. Up the crik the country's open for miles, and goin' and comin' on both sides. Uh-huh, they'd shore pick that place for a night camp."

"What good would that do us?" Muller demanded querulously. "Yuh can't drygulch a wagon train in plumb open country, particular not a train guarded like a Santleblane will be."

Brandon's lips writhed back in the wolfish grin that had gained him his sinister nickname.

"That's what they'll think, too," he said softly. "I recollect that section, Trench, recollect what the crik bank is like just below where the trail crosses. Feller, it's better made to order than the mouth of Skull Canyon!"

CHAPTER VII

Strike of the Hawk

ELECTION DAY dawned brightly with an autumn sun flooding the rangeland with gold. The air was as sparkling as new wine, and a tremulous haze softened crag and spire. Fine election day weather, thought Cale Brandon as he complacently watched John Bowles ride in at the head of his cowboys.

They were followed soon by other ranch owners who had reason to remember favors granted by Cale Brandon or some one of his henchmen. Brandon experienced the peace of mind that births from work well done, with no slighting of detail.

But not for long did Brandon enjoy peace of mind. He experienced his first feeling of disquietude when a long line of swarthy mine workers filed solemnly to the polling place. Further perturbation was caused by the sight of numerous riders who set the trails to smoking with dust as the day wore on. Grim, purposeful they came, men who had not voted in an election for ten years.

There were some feeble attempts to challenge their votes; but they came prepared. Small ranch owners brought

their brand registrations, which proved them citizens of the district and the county.

Workers of claims in the hills had evidence to set the time and place of filing said claims. Workers on ranch or farm proved identity and place of residence with ease. These men, swarthy or bronzed, were citizens of Texas, duly entitled to exercise their right of franchise, and there was no gainsaying them.

"Get the boys together and we'll run the blasted lobos outa town as fast as they come in!" raved Brandon.

"Yuh're loco!" the cautious Muller told him. "Don't yuh see that outfit hangin' around with Tip Walker? Them fellers are fighters, just itchin' for trouble, and don't forget Tip is still a deputy sheriff. And," he added bitterly, "plumb liable to be sheriff before the day is finished. Cale, some almighty smart hombre is back of all this. Them oilers and nesters ain't got brains enough to organize a thing like this. Who in blazes can it be?"

"This is what comes of tryin' to have an honest election!" wailed Lyman Hull. "What we should have done was have our boys in charge at every voting place in the district. Then this wouldn't have happened."

"Who in tarnation coulda figgered on such a thing?" demanded Brandon, and added hopefully: "But the chances are it ain't happenin' any place else but Tortuga. I reckon it's just a local roundup engineered by Tip Walker to get hisself elected sheriff."

BUT as the day wore on, Brandon heard a name spoken with increasing frequency, a name which threw him into an even blacker rage.

"El Halcon!" he raved to Muller and Lyman Hull. "That's the fangin' sidewinder that's stirred up this ruckus! He's back of it. How in all tarnation did that owlhoot do it?"

Neither of his glum henchmen could answer the question.

Sunset came; the voting places closed and the coutining began.

Soon it became evident that the county offices were lost to Brandon's faction. And long before midnight men were arriving on lathered horses to report similar upsets in other parts.

Shortly after midnight, Doc Beard, Tip Walker and Sheriff Tate Quill sat together in the latter's office.

"Well, Tip," said Quill, "I reckon the people have spoke, and yuh're elected. Me, I'm goin' to resign right off so's yuh can take office."

Little Tip Walker reached out a hand.

"We'll just be sorta changin' places, Tate," he said. "For first off I'm appointin' you chief deputy. Yuh can just take orders from me from now on instead of from Cale Brandon." And he added diffidently, "If yuh're worried about that note of yores Brandon holds, I got a few *pesos* salted away yuh can have to clear it up with. And all the security yuh need to give me is yore word!"

Old Tate Quill solemnly shook the hand extended to him.

"By gum, it'll be plumb nice takin' orders from a honest man!" he swore.

A sound at the door caused them to turn. *El Halcon* stood there, the light beating strongly upon his lean, bronzed face and towering form. He was travel-stained, dusty and weary, but there was a laughing light in his reckless gray eyes.

"Howdy, Sheriff?" he greeted Tip Walker. "Yuh can get yore men together quiet and be ready to ride pronto. They swallowed the bait in fine style. I figger they'll make their try somewheres between here and the Pecos crossing. . . ."

A long river and a strange river is the Pecos, winding and shining in the sun. It is a thousand miles of twisting canyon and gorge from the mountains of New Mexico to the bleak bluffs of the Rio Grande.

On its banks grim terrible deeds

have been done. Its glittering waters have seen ghastly sights. It flows through a land that has known but little, and will ever know little of the plow or irrigation of placid settlement. Alkali flats, shifting sands, rolling plain bastioned by rugged hill and gaunt crag—that is the land of the Pecos.

The old, old Chihuahua Trail is white with bleached bones, and nowhere more so than in the neighborhood of Horsehead Crossing. A creek runs into the Pecos not far from Horsehead Crossing, and the Chihuahua Trail dips wearily into it and still more wearily climbs the eastern bank.

Half a mile or so down stream is a straggle of tree and chaparral growth that fringe the dark mouth of a canyon. And just where the trail crosses the creek, on the western bank, is a level expanse, grass-grown and with enough brushwood here and there to provide fuel for chance campers. The east bank of the creek slopes gently upward, but the west bank is almost sheer, matted with grass and a straggle of flowering weeds.

INTO that land, out of the red eye of the sunset, rolled the Santleblane wagon train. On either side of the closely hooded wagons paced alert outriders. Guards sat beside the drivers of the wagons, rifle and shotgun ready to hand. Other guards rode in front of the train. Still others rode in the rear. Fine horses drew the wagons, especially a tall black in the rearmost team, a horse who seemed singularly out of place in such a position.

Arrogant, secure, the train rolled along the Chihuahua Trail. At the level, grass-grown expanse on the west bank of the creek the vanguard pulled up. There was a moment of consultation, then one who was evidently the leader barked an order.

The wagons wheeled from the trail and drew up in orderly line. The drivers got down stiffly from their perches, the guards following. Keen eyes swept the terrain, studying the distant grove and canyon mouth, dismissing both as too far away to constitute a menace.

Cautious men walked to the water's edge, glanced up and down the stream, saw nothing but hurrying water between the banks, one gently sloping, the other sheer and thinly carpeted with grass and widely spaced flowering weeds. Apparently satisfied, they returned to where the cook wagon had drawn up and the evening meal was already preparing.

Soon drivers and guards were seated around the campfire, hungrily emptying the heaping plates handed them by the cook. They laughed and joked, relaxed and free from care.

"Elevate, gents, and stay put!"

With startled exclamation, guards and drivers whirled in the direction from which the harsh voice had sounded. They reached frantically for weapons, then froze in grotesque positions before the grim threat of rifle barrels topping the low bank of the creek.

They stared in amazement at the masked riflemen who had, apparently, materialized from nowhere at all. Then the now all too obvious ruse became apparent.

"Dug holes in the bank and covered them with weeds and grass, the horn toads!" a driver swore between his teeth. "Caught settin', by criminy!"

Again the harsh voice rang out.

"Stand up, gents, reachin' for the sky, and turn yore backs. Right! Now march straight ahead till yuh're plumb past them wagons. Right! Little farther, now. Halt!"

Helplessly the guards and drivers obeyed. Over the lip of the bank clambered the masked men, watchful, alert, rifles ready for instant action. When the last man had topped the bank, they lined up, took a step forward. And then—

From the silent, apparently deserted wagons burst a rolling wave

of flame. The roar of gunfire split the silence like a sword of thunder. Lead hissed through the air and thudded into the bodies of the drygulchers. Down went the front rank in a blood-smeared shambles. Some turned to flee, and were bowled over like rabbits. Some fired wildly at the flaming wagons, and died. Others threw down their guns and howled for mercy. The creek waters surged to a sullen splash, and another.

From the hooded wagons boiled men, smoking rifles in hand. Foremost was the tall form of *El Halcon.* Close behind him was Sheriff Tip Walker, his badge gleaming on his breast. They closed in on what remained of the demoralized raiders.

IT WAS Walt Slade's quick eye that saw the two dots, one black, the other golden, that went sweeping downstream hundreds of yards below the clearing. And it was the Hawk's quick mind that read their meaning aright.

He threw up his rifle, but instantly lowered it again. Shooting at a swimming man at that distance was merest guesswork. The stream ran like a mill-race and half the time the heads of the swimmers, sweeping along with the swift current, were below water or hidden by the splashing waves.

"It's Brandon and Muller!" he shouted to Tip Walker. "They held back and dived into the crik!"

At a dead run he raced to where Shadow stood among the wagon horses. There was no time for saddle and bridle, but the great black required neither. Slade had barely forked him, with shouted directions, before he was thundering downstream, eyes rolling, nostrils flaring red, glorious mane tossing in the wind.

While Slade was still hundreds of yards distant, he saw the two swimmers pull themselves ashore and dash for the shelter of the growth.

"Trail, Shadow, trail!" he shouted, and the black horse seemed fairly to pour his long body over the broken ground.

The fugitives reached the growth, vanished. A moment later they reappeared on the far side of the straggle, mounted now on splendid horses and heading for the dark mouth of the canyon. That canyon, Slade knew, opened onto the Coronado Trail, the shortest route to Mexico and running through the wildest, most desolate country north of the river. Let the fugitives reach that trail, sheltered by the swiftly descending night, and pursuit would be all but a hopeless effort. Grimly he drew his guns, and waited for his shot, as he rode.

Brandon and Muller rode fine horses, but Shadow swiftly closed the distance. Ahead yawned the black mouth of the canyon, but now *El Halcon* was in pistol range. His gray eyes glanced along the long barrel of his Colt, he steadied the flying horse with his knees, and pulled trigger.

A spot of dust puffed up a little to one side of the fleeing pair. Slade saw Muller's horse leap spasmodically. Grimly he corrected his aim, steadied Shadow once more and fired.

Trench Muller threw both hands high into the air, swayed, reeled, crashed to the dust of the trail. His riderless horse careened wildly across the prairie, but Muller lay without sound or motion in the dust.

Cale Brandon cast a glance over his shoulder. Slade could see the gleam of the man's teeth through his beard as his lips drew back in his wolfish snarl. Grimly the Hawk raised his long barrel once more as Shadow closed the gap.

But Brandon did not wait for *El Halcon's* bullet. With a mighty wrench he swerved his big roan sideward, almost threw him, whirled him about on skittering hoofs. Straight for the rushing black horse he rode, his gun flaming.

Slade felt the burn of a bullet along one bronzed cheek, heard the whis-

tling screech of another. Then the speeding horses met with a grinding crash.

DOWN went the roan. Shadow, unable to check his speed, catapulted over the floundering body. Slade freed himself in the split second of time granted him and hurled himself sideward as the black fell.

He struck the ground with stunning force, rolled over and staggered to his feet, his head spinning. Before him loomed the giant form of Cale Brandon. He ducked under Brandon's blazing gun and closed, gripping the big man's corded wrist with sinewy fingers.

Breast to breast they wrestled, panting, gasping, veins standing out on their foreheads like cords. Brandon was fifty pounds heavier than the Hawk and his strength was the strenth of a grizzly. Almost he freed his gun hand, and his whizzing fist missed its mark by a scant inch.

By a mighty effort he whirled *El Halcon* clean off his feet and they struck the ground together and rolled apart. With a yell of triumph, Brandon surged erect. The black muzzle of his gun lined with the Hawk's broad breast.

From Slade's left hip gushed a lance of flame that seemed to center just over Cale Brandon's heart. Brandon's gun dropped from nerveless fingers, he straightened, rose on his tiptoes and then crumpled to the ground.

Holstering his smoking Colt, Walt Slade knelt beside Brandon. The man was still alive, but going fast. He glared up into the bronzed face that bent over him.

"Blast yuh, yore outfit'll take over!" he panted.

"Yes, my outfit will take over," Slade told him quietly.

He held something before the eyes of the dying man, something that gleamed in the last fading light—a silver star set on a silver circle, the honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

"Yes, my outfit will take over," he

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

THROW your loop at these five questions and see how many of them yuh rope. If yuh miss, turn to our answers on page 111—but DON'T LOOK before tryin'. Count yourself 20% for each correct answer, an' if yuh rate 60% or over yuh're a top hand. Let the ranch boss knew how yuh made out, please, address The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.

1. What Westerner was a citizen of four nations, President of one, governor of two states, won an empire for his country and was called the Colossus in Buckskin?
2. Who was Bob Ford and what famous bandit did he kill?
3. In what National Park are the Bridal Veil Falls?
4. Who was known by friendly Indians as "Pahaska?"
5. Who was Mrs. Frank Butler?

Answers Are on Page 111—if You MUST Look!

repeated, "the outfit yuh hoped to smash, Brandon, the outfit that stands for decency and order, and always will. Yes, *El Halcon* is a Ranger, Brandon—undercover man for Captain McNelty. Cap Jim sent me over here to find out why Rangers weren't wanted in this section. I found out, Brandon."

The dying man stared at the silver star.

"The Rangers," he whispered, a rattling in his throat. "I could handle everything else, but I couldn't buck the Rangers!"

Walt Slade laid a handkerchief over Brandon's face and stood up at the clatter of approaching hoofs. The silver star he slipped out of sight. . . .

"It was Brandon's drug-smuggling that gave me the first line on him," Slade told Sheriff Tip Walker after they had enjoyed a belated supper. "When I went up to Brandon's office to 'collect' the reward he offered for *El Halcon,* Trench Muller came in smoking a marihuana cigarette. I spotted it right off from the smell. Then I smelled marihuana on those two crazed drug addicts Brandon sent to scattergun me in the stable. Marks on their arms showed they were getting morphine regular, too. The tie-up with Brandon was pretty obvious, then. And when that pore devil of a Mexican they left for dead in Skull Canyon showed up, he was also marked with the drug."

"How'd yuh know Brandon was mixed up in the drygulchin' of those silver smugglers?" Walker asked.

SLADE shook his head and grinned a little.

"Didn't know for shore," he admitted. "The Mexican couldn't tell me who the silver was intended for, but he knew his outfit had been double-crossed. Process of elimination pointed to Brandon. His mine was producing way and above anything else in the section and had been for a long time. We knew a lot of silver smuggling had been going on and we never could trace it on the other side of the Pecos. Which proved pretty conclusive that it stopped somewhere on this side.

"Melting up smuggled or stolen metal and slipping it to the market by way of a mine isn't new. I've encountered it before. It's mighty hard to trace down when handled as cleverly as Brandon handled it. He had all local law enforcement pretty well under his thumb and he managed to keep the Rangers outa the section.

"In fact, Brandon was pretty close to being the law in this county. If he'd won the election for Hull and the representatives he was backing, he would have been so strong over to the capital that it would have been almost impossible to touch him. I figgered he had to be stopped cold there and I figgered if he was stopped, he'd get reckless and tip his hand. That's why I worked up the scheme of a fake Santleblane wagon train from Chihuahua.

"Brandon knew the Santleblane trains carry silver and plenty of it. He knew he'd need a lot of money to counteract his election set-back and was ripe to take a big chance. Of course he was all the time counting on me for an owlhoot and figgered on handling me accordingly. If he'd had any notion there was a Ranger in the section, he'd have acted different and tanglin' his rope wouldn't have been such an easy chore."

"Uh-huh, plumb easy," Walker agreed drily. "About as easy as walkin' up to a grizzly bear and spittin' in his face and then turnin' him inside out for a fur overcoat. Uh-huh, plumb easy! And it's a shame yuh don't get any credit for what yuh've done. Everybody in this outfit 'cept me figgers yuh for just a owlhoot that had a grudge to settle with Cale Brandon. I tell yuh, it ain't right! What? Yuh gonna ride away now?"

"Yeah," Slade smiled down at him.

"I've got my guitar out of the wagon and I'm right shore Capt'n Jim has got another little chore ready for me about now. *Adios,* Tip. Good luck to the sheriffin' business!"

The last thing he heard Tip Walker say was, "I tell yuh, it ain't right!"

But as he rode away through the starlight, caressing the strings of his guitar with slim fingers and joshing with Shadow between verses of a rollicking old cowboy song Walt Slade thought of the approving nod of stern old Captain Jim McNelty, the Grand Old Man of the Rangers, and was content.

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FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Follow the Further Exploits of El Halcon, the Hawk of the Texas Rangers, as He Fights to Save an Old Spanish Silver Mine from Its Despoilers

TRAIL OF IRON MEN

An Action-Packed Complete Novel

By BRADFORD SCOTT

•

JOHNNY BUYS A GUN

By ORLANDO RIGONI

Author of "Honor in Blood," "Paid in Full," etc.

Only the Deadly Peril Threatening Bitter Water Springs Could Force Orth to Wear His Gun Again!

CHAPTER I

Death at Bitter Water Springs

DANO MACVANE looked up from his desk in the front room of the abode ranchhouse on the Double-Nothing. His grizzled face was screwed out of shape by the cold cigar that jutted from his hard jaw. Macvane's shrewd eyes watched Johnny Orth's face.

"We've got to have the Bitterwater Springs, Johnny," Macvane said blandly. "We're gettin' cramped down on the White Sage. If we can swing our market stuff off the dry feed, we can keep 'em fatter than grease until shippin' time, see?"

Johnny Orth nodded his head. His lean hands kept counting the links in his brass watch-chain like a man who tries to keep things in order. Orth never did talk much. He was tall, slim and genial. His honest, surprised looking eyes made most people ashamed to take advantage of him. Nobody would hire Orth because he appeared so innocent. But Macvane believed he could use Orth's dumbness to good advantage, and so Orth worked for Macvane. It was his one chance for a job.

Orth knew that most people figured he was odd, but he didn't care. He had a notion that most of the trouble in the world came from people trying to mind other people's business and talking more than was necessary.

Orth didn't even carry a gun in a land where a gun is part of a man's clothing. He had a reason for this—a reason that was etched deeply into his soul, a reason that he never talked about. If men asked him why he didn't carry a gun, he'd grin and say:

"It's thisaway, pardner. With a gun a man is apt to shoot first, an' think about it afterwards. Chances are that if he had to go hunt up a gun, he'd have time to think the reason over an' decide it wasn't worth the powder."

Macvane was glad Orth didn't wear a gun, for it gave Orth a peculiar advantage over an armed man in a land where the code of fair play was the law.

Now, Macvane talked on, careful to arouse no suspicion in the only man he dared let onto this scheme he had in mind.

A COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET

While Orth and Crowden were locked in battle, Anna fired pointblank at Brophy

"Old Hoge Bender has the only claim on them springs, Orth. I want you to go over to Hoge's place and make a deal with him. Tell him I'm willin' to give him clear title to fifty head of good cattle in exchange for a quitclaim on the Bitterwater Springs. Here's a deed all made out. All he has to do is sign it."

MACVANE breathed a sigh of relief when Orth accepted the paper and said flatly, "Sure, boss, I'll tell him."

Macvane kept Orth on the payroll because Orth didn't ask many questions, and his honest looks helped put over some good deals. Most hombres would have suspected Macvane of lying and would want a cut on the profits of the scheme.

Macvane was jarred out of his smug thoughts, when Orth asked a terse question.

"Them springs ain't worth no cows, are they, Macvane?"

There was no hint of suspicion in the question, just a vague curiosity and a desire to keep his employer from losing money on a deal.

"I want them for a special reason, Johnny," Macvane growled, chewing his cigar. "You put this deal over for me without spreadin' the news too far, an' I'll take care of you. I've always done the right thing, ain't I?"

"Sure—sure, Boss, you've treated me right. Of course, it ain't none of my business why you want them springs. I'll make the dicker with Hoge Bender."

Later, when he was riding the rim trail toward Bender's Little 2 ranch, Orth got to thinking of other days. Orth had been raised on the north range beyond Bender's Little 2. Five years before he had left that country under grim, depressing circumstances, and he had never had the heart to go back any closer than Macvane's place.

Orth remembered, now, that Bender had had two kids. A boy, very young, and a girl, Anna, who soon would be fifteen. Orth grinned ruefully when he remembered how he had fancied himself in love with Anna. She was just a gangling kid with big, dreamy eyes and a mouth that seemed too large for her face. Though Orth tried to tell himself he had forgotten the girl, the memory of her stirred the old emotion in his breast.

Orth got to wondering now, what Macvane wanted the Bitter Water for. Macvane was usually pretty smart and kept within the law in his conniving. Orth could understand a man making a play for a bunch of hot cattle, or trying to grab off some good grass, but the Bitter Water Springs were poisoned with alkali.

If Orth was curious about the situation, he hid his curiosity behind his expressionless glance. He followed the rim trail around. When he came opposite the springs that were in a hollow below the trail, he stopped to ponder the situation.

The Bitter Water Springs threw out an uncommon lot of water which drained off in a noisy stream down the draw. There was fair grass in these sand hills that held the springs. But grass so far from good water can't put fat on cattle. The few runts and bangtails which grazed here, kept thin traveling out for a drink.

Orth was on the verge of riding down to the spring for a look around when he saw a man wading up the creek.

The man's actions were peculiar, so much so that Orth drew his horse behind a juniper and watched him.

The man was too far away to be recognized by Orth, but there was a ground-dallied buckskin horse that must have been fourteen hands high standing on the bank of the stream. The man was moving slowly up the water, and he was spilling something into the bed of the stream.

"Good gravy, there ain't no fish to

feed in that bitter slop," Orth muttered, frowning.

SUDDENLY a shout rang from the trees on the opposite side of the stream. The stranger spun around. He leaped from the water, crouched and raked out his gun. Swift puffs of smoke bleared from his fist, and a sharp cry came from the fringe of trees that whiskered the hollow.

The stranger forked the buckskin, dug steel and headed into the trees. He stopped for a moment, looked down, then rode harder than before. Orth stopped fumbling with his watch chain, and leaped into action. This was all a little more than he had bargained for. Though he usually kept out of such affairs, this was part of his job, for it concerned the springs he was supposed to dicker for.

Therefore, he piled leather to his cayuse and plowed down the hill. He hit bottom, and rawhided his way to the water. He stopped for a moment, dismounted and examined the stream bed for signs of what the strange man had been doing. Suddenly he spotted something, and his slow working mind did a flip-flop that almost threw it out of gear.

"This beats all," he muttered.

Then he climbed into his kak and proceeded across the clearing to the trees. He didn't go far before his cayuse shied back violently, and Orth snubbed the snaffle to keep the animal from bolting. There, on the ground at his feet with blood drenching the front of his old flannel shirt, lay Hoge Bender.

Orth piled down. He tore the flannel shirt open and listened for the old man's heart. He heard nothing. Hoping there was still a spark of life in the man, he ran to the stream and filled his hat. When he returned he sloshed the old man's seamed face with water. Hoge Bender came back from the dead for one moment. His eyes stared vacantly up at Orth.

Orth knew when a man was dying, and he didn't fool around with unnecessary questions. He had business to transact with Hoge Bender. He meant to see it through.

"Hoge, you're a gonner," he said gently.

Bender gasped, and nodded.

"Sure. You—you're Orth, ain't yuh? Len Orth's son, who used to live over my way?"

Orth nodded, remembering how his dad had once partnered with Bender on a trailing venture.

"Save your breath, old-timer," Orth said softly. "I was on my way over to yore place to make a dicker for the Bitter Water Springs. Dano Macvane is offerin' fifty head of fat cattle for rights to them."

"No—no, siree—" Bender was hanging on to life with every ounce of will-power he had. "No—deal—Orth. Every skunk in the country has heard the rumor. They—they got me, finally, I—I want to leave the ground to my kids, Orth. Scratch me out a will—favor o' my kids. Just say, I—I—Hoge Bender—" The old voice was failing.

"I'll fix it up, Hoge. Save yore strength," Orth cautioned.

Orth scribbled a will on the back of the quitclaim deed which he had received from Macvane. When he had finished, he put the stub of the pencil into Hoge's shaking hand and held up the paper for him to sign. Hoge's eyes were foggy with death. Orth helped guide his hand as he signed.

Hoge tried to say something more, something his kids were to be told. But he died when the last letter was finished, died with a sigh of satisfaction, secure in the knowledge that his kids would get his land and that their future was assured.

But Hoge Bender hadn't signed the hastily drawn will! Orth had slyly turned the paper over after writing the will. He had tricked Hoge into signing the quitclaim deed to the Bitter Water Springs!

CHAPTER II

Double Deal

JOHNNY ORTH took the signed paper and shoved it into his riding boot. Then he found Hoge's horse and draped the limp body of the dead man across the empty saddle. Thus he struck out for the Little 2. And as he rode memories crowded to the fore.

He saw familiar landmarks of other days. He headed for the Little 2 instinctively, and wondered if Anna would remember him. He could never forget her—such large eyes in such a thin face.

When he rode into the Little 2, the place looked strange to him. It had always been well-kept and prosperous looking. Now it was rundown, frazzled as an itchy bangtail. Orth didn't know how to face the kids. But he rode doggedly down the lane with his burden flopping on the horse behind him.

As he neared the porch, Orth was suddenly confronted by the two kids who appeared at the corner of the house. At first Orth thought he had made a mistake. These couldn't be the kids he was looking for.

The lad was shoulder-high with eyes that widened abruptly.

"Anna, they've shot Dad, just like he feared!" he cried.

The lad hobbled forward on a crooked leg, and Orth gritted his teeth at the pitiful sight.

More elusive memories drifted up from his mind. He recalled the yarn about an accident with a runaway team in which Mother Bender had been killed, and how Billy Bender had gotten his leg crushed trying to pry her from under the wagon.

There was one thing, however, that didn't fit in with his recollection of the place, and that was the comely, almost radiant girl before him. Orth counted back swiftly. He decided she couldn't be more than twenty. It was miraculous what a few years could do for a girl. One day awkward, colorless, excitable as a wild colt, then along comes twenty—

"What happened?" the girl's low voice cut through Orth's thoughts.

"Right sorry, miss—Anna. I—I happened to hear a shot an' found yore dad almost dead. I was headin' thisaway to talk business with him."

The girl's brown eyes searched his face. Orth felt a little uncomfortable under their level scrutiny. There was strength in this girl. Strength that held back the grief which was crowding her eyes.

Orth guessed the story. Hoge Bender had always set a great store by his wife. With her gone he had lost his purpose for living. He had let the ranch run down, no longer having the will to fight the encrouchments of such men as Lije Crowden and Doggy Vandesen. He had neglected the ranch in favor of the hills where he could be alone.

Orth thought of all this, and realized how it must have shaped Anna Bender's life. It had brought that touch of bitterness to her lips and the smoky gleam of suspicion to her eyes.

"You're Johnny Orth, aren't you?" she asked flatly.

Orth nodded. "I'm sorry about your dad, Anna."

"What business could you have had with him?" she asked, ignoring his expression of sympathy.

"Reckon that can wait, Anna. We'd better get Hoge's body into the house. Might find some clue in his pockets as to who shot him and why."

Orth carried the old man's heavy body into the plainly furnished house while the girl held the door open. Billy hobbled after, his lips pressed tight but tears welling over the brim of his eyes.

"You—you search him," the girl said softly.

Orth understood her feelings. He started to probe into the pockets of the worn clothes. His first attempt revealed a Durham sack filled with something much heavier than makings. He fingered it open and gasped as a yellow stream of dust slid into his hand.

"Gold!" Orth gasped.

His eyes lifted to Anna's face. The girl's features had blanched, giving a vivid redness to her lips that no longer seemed too large for her face.

"It isn't the first he's brought home," she said evenly.

"Where does he get it?"

"He wouldn't even tell me. He feared the rumor might spread and that this very thing would happen."

Orth knew she was suffering tortures, yet she hid her grief under a stoic calm.

Billy spoke up quickly, grabbing Orth's arm as though to lend weight to his words.

"I—I follered him once—trailed him into the canyon toward Bitter Water Creek. He was headin' up toward the springs."

"Shut up, Billy!" the girl commanded, her chin lifting a little in defiance. "What was your business with Dad?" she asked Orth.

"Reckon it's done, miss. Hoge lived long enough to sign a quitclaim to the Bitter Water Springs in favor of Dano Macvane in exchange for fifty head of good cattle."

The girl stiffened.

"I don't believe it!"

Orth was used to being called a liar. It never fazed him. He produced the paper from his boot, careful to hold the signed quitclaim side toward her. Anna was so skeptical that she snatched the paper from him before he could stop her. He tried to get it back, but it fluttered to the floor with the back side on which the will had been written staring up at them.

The girl read the will swiftly. Comprehension dawned in her eyes like a waking child. She looked up, hate, accusation, all fused upon her young face.

"You snake! You tricked him! Tricked a dying man!"

For once in his life Orth felt overcome by emotion. He couldn't tell whether it was fear, shame, or remorse. He just felt the impact of the girl's accusations and he floundered helplessly for some defense.

"Wait a minute, miss. You—you don't understand."

"I understand, all right. I understand that you knew about the gold and why Macvane wanted the springs. You found Dad dying. Or, maybe you killed him yourself after forcing him to sign this paper, knowing he couldn't dispute you after he was dead. Oh, I hate you!"

Orth was shocked by her charges. He stepped forward, grasped her and marveled at the strength of her smooth, soft arms. He shook her to shut her up.

"Does a killer make out a last will an' testament for the man he aims to kill? I ain't no plaster saint, but I ain't no dog, either. I figger it's better for you to accept the cows, miss, then to beg for trouble."

SHE tore herself away from him, scorn fogging her eyes.

"Your advice isn't wanted. You're working for Macvane. You think because you're just a middle-man your conscience is clear. You advise me to accept fifty head of cattle that have probably been stolen, for a gold mine!

"No wonder they call you Crazy Orth! No wonder you go about without a gun, knowing that the pity of better men will keep them from killing you!"

Orth's face was like stone. He spoke in a brittle voice.

"Take them cows an' keep outa trouble, Anna. What for you want to get mixed up in a fight that's goin' to bring you a pack o' misery? Hold to

them cows, they're real. This other fluke—"

"Speak for yourself, Johnny Orth!" Anna flashed. "I'm not a coward—a spineless thing afraid of a fight. I don't care if I lose some skin and get my hair mussed. I mean to fight!"

"Give me a few days to dally this thing out, Anna," Orth pleaded. "Give me a chance to find the real killer. I can find him by his horse."

Billy came forward now. His big, curious eyes were on Orth though he addressed his sister.

"Sure, sis, give him a few days. Maybe you got him tagged all wrong. If he's the cheat you claim I'll force him into a gun-fight myself."

"All right," Anna said finally. "Bring on your cows, Johnny Orth. They'd better be honest cattle!"

"I'll go to Delarone an' send back the sheriff an' coroner for Hoge's body, Anna," Orth said as he left.

CHAPTER III

The Dead Are Silent

ORTH rode through the gathering dusk toward Delarone. He tried to convince himself that he was doing the right thing. He might have told the girl more, but he wanted to be sure of himself. He didn't blame her for suspecting him. Fifty head of cattle weren't much to pay for a gold mine.

Orth had ideas about the claim, and he couldn't get the picture of the crippled boy and the brave girl out of his mind. What chance would they have to hang onto such a claim when Hoge Bender had been killed deliberately by those who wanted it?

The kids needed help. It looked as if it were going to take more than talk and bare hands to get them out of the hole. Orth went first to the office of the sheriff and told his story. The sheriff was all for jailing Orth as the only witness to the murder, until he could return with Hoge's body and question Orth. But Orth forestalled arrest by promising to hang around until the sheriff's return.

"If you lock me up, Sheriff, word will get out about the murder an' the real killer will make himself scarcer than legs on a snake. I aim to stick around anyway."

So Orth drifted over to the Shorthorn Saloon and sidled up through the crowd to the bar. Lije Crowden was there. Believing that Orth had come to Delarone on private business for Macvane, Crowden strolled over, hoping to learn what he could about his old enemy. A feud had been going on between Crowden and Macvane for so long that nobody knew what had started it.

"Have a drink, Orth. I'm buyin'," Crowden suggested in his colorless voice. "What brings you so far from home?"

Orth accepted the drink, and answered the last question in his bland way.

"I was sent over to Hoge Bender's ranch on some business for Macvane."

Crowden's steely eyes drew into slits. His ash-gray face seemed to blue up a little. For a moment he didn't know what to say. In that time Doggy Vandesen, partner of Crowden's in the range-lording business, wiggled his rather fat body up to the rail.

"Count me in on that drink, Lije," Vandesen grunted.

"Shore, Doggy, step up. Orth, here, tells me he's on his way to transact business with Hoge Bender."

"You got me wrong, Crowden," Orth objected. "I've already got my business done. I'm in here to get the coroner. Hoge is deader'n a second-hand joke. Stung by a snake, he was. I got to him just afore he died. He signed over the Bitter Water Springs to Dano Macvane for fifty head of cattle."

Orth was playing with his drink, unaware, apparently, of the effect his news had upon Crowden.

"The heck you say? Did you happen to see the snake that stung the old gent?"

CROWDEN'S face turned bleak and his voice was sharp and alert with an aroused interest.

"Shore did. Pesky critter got away before I could find out what breed it was. I got Hoge's signature on a quitclaim before he cashed in."

Crowden laughed. It was a little too loud for a man who is sure of his joke.

"That's a good one on Macvane, pardner. Hoge didn't have no clear-cut claim to them springs. I've got 'em sewed up tight on a water filin'. But my cows ain't salt hogs. They won't drink it. I'll sell out to Macvane at my price—otherwise he'd better keep off."

Orth was staring ahead of him, but in the glass behind the bar he caught the sly wink that Crowden flashed to Vandesen. He realized that Crowden was in on the mystery of the Bitter Water, but he didn't let Crowden suspect this. Crowden knew about the gold, and was playing dumb for a purpose. Perhaps, he wanted to get Macvane into a trap and was using the gold as a bait. Orth didn't try to figure the thing out. As usual, he made his case from facts that were apparent.

Reckon if you own the springs, Crowden," Orth agreed, "Macvane will have to do business with you. But I got him a quitclaim from Hoge, an' he might decide to fight yore claim in court."

"To heck with the courts!" Crowden snapped, his bushy hair bristling. "You just tell him what I said. I've got other offers, but I'm takin' the highest price from friend or foe. Fact is, I don't see what good the water is. It's so full of alkali."

Orth sipped his drink and lied smoothly.

"Macvane has got him some cattle from the lower Pecos country. Then West Texas cattle are raised on brackish water. They won't touch sweet water unless it's salted a mite. They like it fine then."

Crowden knew Orth was lying, but he played along, eager to make his own point.

"Reckon, then, Macvane is the logical man to get the Bitter Water Springs."

"He's already got 'em, Crowden. It's you who'd better figger out a way to make a deal. By the way, you don't happen to have a friend who rides a fourteen-hand, yellow horse, do you?"

Crowden pulled away from the bar. His gaunt body froze as his hand dropped near his gun. But he remembered that Orth carried no gun, and his lip curled in derision.

"When you go about makin' them kind of words, Orth, be man enough to carry a gun an' give an hombre satisfaction."

Orth's eyes were wide and innocent.

"Gosh, Crowden, I didn't mean no offense. I just happened to see a gent on a horse like that. He'd lost a rowel to his spur and I found it. Hammered silver and hard to replace."

Orth lied convincingly, so convincingly that Crowden's eyes became puzzled.

"Let's see the trinket," he suggested.

"I ain't got it handy. It's in the pocket of my saddle down at the livery barn."

"Was it star or sawtooth?"

Orth guessed, "Star—big circle."

Crowden shrugged. "I ain't got no idee who owns it. Mebbe if you get it—"

Orth turned from the bar without haste.

"Sure. Be back pronto."

But he didn't go back. He didn't even wait for the sheriff, though he knew he might incur the suspicion and wrath of the lawman for bolting against his promise. But Orth felt sure that Crowden was hitched up

with Hoge's death, and he meant to prove it. He got his horse and circled the town, looking for the rangy buckskin, but without success.

Grimly, Orth headed back toward the Double-Nothing. It was full moon, and he could pick the short trail toward the Bitter Water easily. In places where the trees were thick he avoided the trail lest he run into an ambush.

As Orth struck back into the trail after one of his detours, he saw the big yellow horse he had been searching for lying on it's side, dead. Orth dismounted. Feeling of the buckskin's body, he found it cold. Ahead of the horse, lying doubled up as if he had been dead when thrown from the animal, lay the rider.

Orth struck a match and examined the ragged wound in the rider's chest. As near as he could tell, a .44 slug had made the wound. Orth knew that Hoge Bender had always carried a .38 and he believed somebody had made a bad mistake. He pondered the situation for a moment.

Somebody had hired this man to kill Hoge Bender. Then the one who had hired him doublecrossed the killer, and shot him to shut his mouth forever. There was a good chance that the law might believe the man had been killed in a fight with Hoge, or at least that he had been wounded and had drifted this far before dying. But that wouldn't account for the horse being shot.

It was a little too deep for Orth, and he decided to let events take their course. However, he remembered that he had claimed to have one of the rowels from the dead man's spurs. So now he took out his stout cattle knife and pried one of the rowels loose. It was silver, large, and a star! Crowden did know this man!

Orth shoved the rowel into his pocket. Still not satisfied, he struck another match and searched the body. He found a receipt made out in favor of Lije Crowden for ten ounces of raw gold.

As the match flickered to the end, Orth went to smother it between his fingers when a shot from the ridge behind him sent a bullet whanging past his ear. Only the uncertain light had saved him from the fate of Hoge and this dead man at his feet. He rolled off his feet, crawled to his cayuse and hoisted himself up on the off side as he made a break for the cover of the trees.

Orth realized, of course, that his talk in Delarone, and his hint of suspicions had made somebody in the town afraid of him. They had followed, caught up with him and now had tried to kill him.

Orth rode like a madman until he was on the rim trail beyond the springs. It was at times like these that Orth's slim hand hungered for a gun—when his arm ached for the sure draw that must spell death to an opponent. But bitter memories always beat the hunger back.

HE SLOWED his horse down after passing the springs and proceeded at a slower pace. It was nearly morning when he rode into the Double-Nothing. He tried to pass the big house without disturbing anybody inside. But as he passed Macvane's bedroom, Macvane called through the open window.

"Who's there? That you, Johnny Orth?"

Macvane sounded worried. Orth realized that the rancher was staking more on this deal than appeared on the surface.

"Sure, Boss, it's me."

"Come in here!" snapped Macvane.

When Orth got inside, Macvane was seated on the edge of the bed, his bony, crooked legs looking ludicrous in his long nightshirt. He was trying to get his soggy cigar going, for he had been chewing on it most of the night.

"What happened, Orth? I gave you up for lost."

Orth told his story, at least part of it. He told of the shooting of Hoge Bender, and how he had tricked Bender into signing the quitclaim deed instead of the will. He left out some of the details like the man wading in the creek, and he finished with:

"You know, Boss, Hoge had a Durham sack full of gold dust on him. Do you reckon he got it from the springs?"

"Not so loud," Macvane cautioned, his eyes glittering at the mention of the gold. "Orth, I've got a feelin' sometimes that you ain't as dumb as you make out. Suppose he did get it there? I suppose you didn't blab it all over the range. I'm glad you got that paper signed before the old man died. It was a good trick you pulled on Hoge."

Macvane guffawed over the joke and his eyes squinted. He reached into the drawer of the old bureau at his side and took out a roll of money. A fiver was on the outside to make it look good, but underneath were mostly ones.

Orth protested, "Why, Boss, it wasn't worth it. Them springs ain't much good."

"Take it," Macvane urged, smiling shrewdly. "There'll be more when this deal is finished. You say Crowden figgers I'll have to trade with him, eh? Well, I'm goin' to beat him to the jump. You need sleep, Orth, but I have another job for you."

"That's all right, Boss," Orth said patiently. "Glad to oblige."

"All right, listen close. I don't want no mistake about this. You ride up to the high range where the drift fence ends. You'll find fifty head of cows—all fat an' strong. Don't pay no attention to the brands because I just bought them cattle an' ain't had time to rebrand 'em. I want you to get them cows over to Bender's kids as soon as you can in payment for the springs.

"Crowden might try to take 'em away from the kids, but that's their lookout, see? All I want is to establish my claim to the springs an' I want a receipt for the cattle."

Orth began to feel something troubling him. Usually he would have accepted orders without a second thought. For, after all, he was just a hand doing his job as the boss wanted it done. But this set-up looked mighty bad for the kids. He could still see them. Anna, brave and alluring; Billy, crippled and almost helpless. The kids were pawns in this game, and they were being squeezed from both sides.

"Sure, Macvane," Orth agreed. "I'll deliver the fifty cows."

With that he went down to the bunkhouse to grab forty winks before the sun should rouse him out.

CHAPTER IV

Payment in Full

THE fifty head of cattle were at the end of the drift fence as Macvane had predicted. They were good stock, fat and hefty with a trace of better blood than the average run of Double-Nothing stock. But he discovered, too, that the cattle weren't Double-Nothing. They wore Crowden's Hook-and-a-half brand!

Orth's face clouded up. His eyes took on a strange, craggy appearance. These range lords were piling their fight upon the two kids. Macvane had said that the cattle had been bought, but Orth doubted that any bill of sale had been turned over for them. There were rumors that Macvane received a cut for protection from rustler bands working the back ranges. These cows were, no doubt, part of his payment.

So Orth rode on by, went inside the drift fence and routed out some whitefaces down in the Aspen Springs section which were branded with the

Double-Nothing. If Macvane made any kick over this, Orth would tell him that these were the first cattle he had come across and had supposed they were the right ones. Macvane could do nothing but criticize his dumbness.

Driving hard, Orth hazed the cattle across to the Little 2 range before dark. He didn't take them directly to the ranch. He pushed them up a side draw, and hid them in a thick growth of junipers where they could secure enough grass and water.

This done, Orth rode to the ranch-house and knocked on the door. Anna opened the portal. Shadowed against the lamp inside, Orth found her to be more beautiful than he had at first pictured her. Her hair was a halo catching the mellow light.

"Why have you come here?" she asked coldly. "The sheriff has been looking for you."

"I brought your cattle, Anna." Orth removed his worn hat and his fingers fumbled with the watch-chain. "Reckon I'm plumb wore out with the hard night I put in last night. Could you put me up for a spell?"

"I don't know what your game is, Crazy Orth," Anna said in the same cold voice, "and I don't trust you. If there is gold in the Bitter Water, then you've cheated us by making us take the cattle."

"Let me bed down my horse, Anna. I have some explainin' to do."

The girl eyed him suspiciously, but Billy hobbled out eagerly.

"I'll tend yore hoss, Orth. Reckon I'm most a man now. Some day my leg'll be first rate."

Orth meant to refuse the crippled boy, for he felt the chore would be too much for him. However, the eagerness and courage of the lad affected Orth so strongly that he yielded the reins. Orth stepped inside and Anna relented enough to offer him some food.

"I can fix something in a minute," she insisted, leading him into the kitchen."

ORTH was grateful for the bacon and potatoes and home-made bread she served him. As he ate, he tried to explain why he had made her accept the beef.

"I've got a good notion the Bitter Water Springs are salted, Anna," Orth told her. "I seen the hombre with the yeller horse seedin' gold in the water. Leastways, after the shootin' I hurried down there an' found a sprinkle of gold on a dry rock that stuck up outa the creek. Water ain't givin' no gold up thataway. You've gotta dig down to bedrock to find any worthwhile dividends. That saltin' is what got the rumor started about the gold, an' fooled Macvane into wantin' the springs. Must have fooled yore dad, too."

"So you thought you'd doublecross Macvane and see that I got the cattle, at least, is that it?" she asked slowly.

"Sure. That's why I tricked yore dad into signing the quitclaim. He was too far gone to argue with. I figgered you'd be better off with the stock than with that rotten water. Macvane told me he wanted the springs for watering Texas cattle. All right, I done my job an' got 'em for him."

The girl was unrelenting.

"Crazy Orth, you've got more fool ideas than a Chinese cook-book. I don't believe your story because I don't think the gold we found on Dad came from the Bitter Water. It don't look like that kind of gold."

Orth dropped his fork, and scratched his lean head.

"Go get it, Anna. I'll prove it came from the salted creek."

Before the girl could comply there was a sharp knock on the front door. Billy hadn't returned from the barn, and Orth thought it might be him. He remained at the table while the girl went to open the door. The heavy

tramp of boots clumped into the room, and Orth was startled to hear Crowden's heavy voice. Orth crept from the table back into the deeper shadows of the kitchen.

"Miss, I want to make a deal with you for the map of Bitter Water Canyon that old Hoge made out," Crowden told her, unaware of Orth's presence in the kitchen. "I'll pay a fine price for it."

"Why would my Father want a map of Bitter Water Canyon?" Anna asked with spirit.

Crowden coughed, went on, "I figgered he might have found some good water in the canyon—some new, sweet spring. The grass in there is worth a lot."

"Worth as much as gold, is that it?" Anna said flatly.

Crowden flushed. He looked very uncomfortable.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, miss, but get this straight. I can make it tough for you around here now that yore dad is dead—or I can make it easy. You'd better be smart an' play the game my way. Understand?"

Anna's answer was as proud as ever.

"I have no more claim on the Bitter Water. Dad sold his claim to Dano Macvane for fifty head of cattle, and I've received payment."

"I'd like to see them cows. Where are they?"

"I—I don't know right now."

"Of course you don't. I want that paper, see? No more beatin' around the bush."

The girl gasped with pain as Crowden caught her arm.

"Let go my arm, Crowden. Let me go!" Anna screamed.

"Not until you give me that map," he said, ugly menace in his tone.

HIDDEN in the kitchen, Orth felt the girl's cry stab through him. Yet, this was one of those crises he had always avoided. After all, why should he get mixed up in this anymore than he was? He had no personal stake in the deal.

Despite these thoughts, Orth tensed for a spring. Before he could reach the kitchen door leading into the living room, he heard the front door slam open and heard Billy's shrill voice:

"Let go my sister, Lije Crowden!"

Orth reached the door in time to see Billy kicking Crowden's shins with his crippled leg. Crowden cursed, turned and struck the kid a blow along the head that piled him in a pitiful heap in the corner.

Orth forgot his resolve to keep out of trouble. He bolted into the room, tore the girl away from Crowden and slammed his fist against Crowden's ash-gray jaw. Crowden was rolling with the punch and it never hurt him. He squared around, dazed at Orth's sudden appearance from nowhere, and equally surprised that Johnny Orth should show fight.

Crowden was bigger than Orth by forty pounds, with a reach four inches longer than that of ordinary men. Despite this Orth charged in. He hammered blows to Crowden's chest, tried to knock the smirk off his thin, gray lips. Crowden's fist exploded in Orth's face. Orth fell hard. He got up, dizzy, but game, and lunged again. Once more Crowden's lean fist battered him down. Orth got up, weaving and bloody, yet willing to fight.

Before Crowden could hit him again, Anna ran from the bedroom with a gun and stopped the fight by threatening Crowden. Crowden glared at Orth, and the smirk came back to Crowden's face.

"Lucky for you, Orth, that you had a petticoat to save yoreself with. Go back to Macvane an' tell him I'm not takin' any offers on the Bitter Water. I've changed my mind." Then Crowden turned on the girl. "I'm comin' back tomorrow an' you'd better have that map handy."

He whirled and stalked out into the

yard. Seconds later hoofs drummed along the trail and he was gone.

"What's this talk about a map?" queried Orth, rubbing his bruised jaw.

"I don't know. Dad never mentioned one. I don't know where Crowden got the notion there was a map."

Orth's eyes squinted shrewdly. He was mad, and hurt, and the sight of Crowden beating the helpless kids had filled him with a desire for revenge.

"Get me a paper. We'll make a map. You can sell it for all you can get, Anna. Make the price plenty high."

BILLY hobbled over with paper and pencil. Orth traced a crude map of Bitter Water Canyon from memory, placing a cross in one of the side draws. This done, he got an old receipt that had been signed by Hoge Bender. He traced over Hoge's name by placing the map over the receipt. The signature was exactly as Hoge would have scrawled it, and gave the map an authentic appearance.

When this had been done, Orth decided to ride back to the Double-Nothing at once. He felt sure Crowden would send the sheriff out to pick him up, and Orth meant to remain out of jail until this mess was cleared up.

He was dead tired when he reached the Double-Nothing, but he stopped at Macvane's window as he rode past the house and tapped on the sill. There was no answer to his signal. The window was open so Orth pushed the blind aside and struck a match. From the saddle he could poke his head into the room far enough to see that the bed hadn't been slept in. Dano Macvane was gone!

Orth was puzzled, and refused to give thought to the fears that welled up in his mind. He went to the bunkhouse, saw that all of the regular riders were snoring except one and went to bed himself.

He was awakened late in the afternoon by Hal Jergens, one of the riders, dragging him out of bed by the leg.

"Old man wants to see you pronto, Crazy," Jergens said through his smoke. "He ain't in no fine frame of mind from the looks of his cigar. It's plumb frazzled."

Orth drew on his boots and strode to the house. Macvane called him into his office. Orth found the grizzled cattleman eating his cigar and padding up and down the floor like a caged lobo. Macvane was covered with dust. His eyes were bleary and his broad shoulders were stooped with fatigue.

"Blast you, Orth," he raged when Orth came in. "You took the wrong cows to Hoge Bender's place."

Orth fingered his watch-chain and frowned.

"I picked up the first bunch inside the fence, Boss. You told me to."

"You're a liar, Orth. I allus had you tagged as a man who could be trusted. Now I find you doublecrossin' me. I can't let every jackrabbit know my business, so I had to go trade back them cows myself. You sure hid 'em fine in that draw, but I found 'em, and made the swap."

Orth felt a catch in his throat. Slow anger was boiling up in him as he faced Macvane.

"You—you mean you left them Hook-and-a-half cows on the kids' place?"

"Why not?"

"Crowden'll howl his head off when he finds 'em. It'll mean trouble for the kids."

"I ain't worryin' my head about that. Fact is, it'll make things simpler with the kids outa the country. I've got something else to tell you, Orth." Macvane was fighting the wrath that kept rising higher in his red face. "I made a side trip into Delarone an' just got back. I heard that Crowden an' Vandesen are out to rook the kids. They came into town just before I left with a map Crowden got from the girl by tradin' her a part of his south range. I also heard the sheriff is out

to arrest you, Orth. Bein' a law-abidin' citizen I'm forced to keep you a prisoner here until the sheriff shows up."

Orth tensed. Suddenly his fingers itched for the feel of a gun. It wasn't for himself. So far as he was concerned he'd just as soon play along with the tide, but the kids were in trouble all the ways from the ace. The wolf outfits were gnawing them up. Orth had helped get them into this jam, and he must get them out of it. When Crowden discovered the map to be no good, and found his cattle on the Bender range, he'd raise plenty of trouble with Anna and Billy.

Macvane drew his Colt. He forced Orth into the basement. Before he locked the door, Macvane tried to get back his roll of money. Orth insisted that he had left the money with the kids, which was a lie. Macvane suspected the lie, and growled:

"No matter, I'll get my *dinero* when the sheriff takes it from you, you doublecrossin' son!"

CHAPTER V

Showdown

PACING the damp cellar at the Double-Nothing, Johnny Orth kept thinking of Anna and her brother. Crowden had lost no time in rushing back to the Little 2 to make a deal for the map. However, when he found the map to be a fake, he'd take his anger out on the kids. Orth had steered them into trouble, and now he must get free in order to help them out of it.

As he measured off the floor, he heard a cat whimper close to him. He struck a match, and saw the old house cat. It hadn't been there a moment before. Orth wondered where it had come from. He chased it back. As it prowled about he followed it. It went to the rear of the cellar, up over the wall, and into the low space under the floor joists.

Orth crept after it, watching it crawl out of a small hole where an old ventilator window had been boarded over. Orth reached the window and tried the boards. They were warped, the nails rusty. He eased two of the boards off, praying that they wouldn't make too much noise. The hole was large enough for his slim body, and he dragged himself through.

He didn't stop to see if Macvane was still at home. He judged it was well after midnight, and it would take him the rest of the dark hours to do what he had in mind. He got his cayuse, dug his roll of bills out of the oat bin where he had hidden it, and headed his cayuse for Delarone.

A strange desire drove Orth. He was going to buy a gun! Those who knew Orth would have scoffed at the idea.

"Johnny Orth with a shootin' iron? Heck, he'd blast his fool head off!" That's what they would have said.

Johnny Orth didn't care about that. He needed a gun to bring him up to the size of the other quick-fight gents who were persecuting the only people Orth had felt affection for since the death of his father.

He went directly to the shabby loan shop run by Bett James. James fisted the sleep from his eyes as he came to the door in answer to Orth's knock. He was startled to see his visitor.

"What brings yuh out at this time o' night, Orth?" James yawned.

"I've come for it, Bett. I've come for the gun I left here when my Dad died."

James was startled out of his sleepiness.

"Yuh—yuh ain't goin' to use it? Yuh ain't forgettin' yore promise?"

Orth's eyes were slate now and his face was grim.

"Reckon the dead can't change their minds, Bett, but if Dad was alive I figger he'd change his. He'd cheer for

what I'm goin' to do. Give me the gun."

Bett James fished the gun out of the safe. Orth's hand curved about it familiarly. He got a belt of ammunition with the weapon and returned to his sweating horse.

DAWN was breaking when Orth rode up the lane to the Little 2. As he neared the house he heard strange sounds coming from within. Someone was sobbing. Then he heard Vandesen's oily voice vomiting a string of oaths.

Orth slid from the saddle and felt as if he were walking on air. Five years slid from his shoulders and there was no longer that curious, trustful look in his eyes. He felt taut as a string, yet in perfect control of every nerve and muscle. He reached the door with a catlike tread. He slid inside. Then blind rage clotted his eyes with hate!

Billy was kneeling on the floor, and Vandesen was wielding a whip over him. Vandesen was barking questions.

"Where's Anna? Where's the right map? How come them Hook-and-a-half cattle on yore range? Tell me the truth!"

Billy refused to speak. His shirt was ripped open and a red welt showed at his throat.

"Vandesen, turn around. You're goin' to die, an' I want you to see it comin'," Orth said, his voice low and deadly.

Vandesen spun, dropped the whip. His clawed hand snatched for his gun. Though he was swift, it seemed ages before the gun cleared leather. Then Orth's hand moved. There was nothing crazy about Orth's draw. He slugged two shots into Vandesen's chest before the fattish man could burn powder.

Billy was on his crippled foot.

"You—you killed him!" he gasped.

Orth nodded. "He had it comin'. Where's Anna?"

"Up the canyon some place. She found a real gold map—sold the fake one to Crowden. Crowden's mad as blazes about his cows."

"I'm going after Anna, Billy," Orth cut in. "You'd better hide. You're plumb worn out."

"I'm goin' with you, Orth. I'll show 'em they can't horse-whip me outa the fight just 'cause I—I'm crippled and only a boy."

Orth didn't have time to argue. He felt that Macvane might have gone to the canyon. With Crowden already there, anything might happen. Orth must save the girl, even if it cost him his life. He had killed Vandesen, and the sheriff was looking for him on that other matter. After this business was all settled, the sheriff could have him.

He rode first to the location he had marked on the false map, expecting to find Crowden there. Aside from some freshly dug earth, he found nothing. Crowden had gone after a futile examination of the ground.

Suddenly Orth heard a shot just two gullies over from the one he was in. He swung up, slapped his cayuse and burned brush. He headed up the second draw. At the top of it he saw Crowden. Beside him was Harlan Brophy, a shifty-eyed gambler from town. So Crowden had a partner in his crooked scheming! Crowden was holding Anna in front of him as a shield. And pounding up the draw, his gun drawn, was Macvane!

"Don't come no closer, Macvane!" Crowden warned. "The girl confessed it was you who shoved my cows on her range in payment for this ground. You sent Crazy Orth—"

Macvane's answer was a shot that raked a red slit along Crowden's lean head. Crouched behind the girl, Crowden fired around her while close at hand Brophy uttered a hoarse cry and unlimbered his Colt. Crowden's shot slogged into a tree behind Orth's boss. Then Macvane whirled and snapped a shot at the gambler.

Brophy's six-gun slipped from his

fingers, clattering along the rocks. He howled in pain and clutched his bullet-scoured arm. At that same moment Crowden flipped hammer again, and knocked Macvane out of the saddle with a whining slug that drilled the rancher's chest.

Johnny Orth chose that moment to spur his horse across the draw. Crowden spotted him at the last instant. His gun flamed and muzzle light crawled across the gloom. But Johnny couldn't fire because of the danger of hitting Anna. Suddenly Crowden thrust the girl away from him. At that same moment Orth left his hull in a great lunge.

He struck Crowden with tremendous force and bowled him over. They rolled and threshed along the ground. They fought free, staggered to their feet. Orth drew his Colt, but before he could flip a shot, Crowden came in close. They locked in a tight clinch, then, each man fastening an iron grip on the other's gun-wrist.

Behind them Brophy made a furious rush toward Orth. Anna saw him charge and uttered a faint cry. She darted forward to pick up the gun which the gambler had dropped. And while Orth and Crowden were locked in battle, Anna fired pointblank at Brophy.

The gambler stopped as if he'd collided with a stone wall. Slowly he broke at the hips and fell to the ground.

At the same moment Johnny Orth gave Crowden's wrist a vicious twist, forcing the cowman to drop his gun. Quickly Orth stepped backward. He was gripping his Colt and all mercy was gone from his features.

"You've done yore last dirt, Crowden," Orth droned. "I happen to know you paid to have Hoge Bender killed. You salted the Bitter Water to get Macvane to buy the springs. Now you want to get this claim yorcself. It's no go. I found the fellow on the yeller horse. I've got that spur rowel, Crowden, an' a signed confession that it was you who paid to have Hoge killed!"

Orth lied calmly, brandishing the receipt for the gold he had taken from the corpse. His eyes narrowed with a savage intensity.

"You don't deserve the break, but I'm gonna let you pick up your gun. When you've got it in yore fist let 'er flicker!"

Dark rage shook the cowman. Then a sneer furled his mouth.

"All right, sucker. You know a lot about me, but you won't be alive long to swear to it."

Crowden was diving for his weapon even as he spoke. It was a swift, deadly move. But Johnny Orth was ready for it. As Crowden broke out of his low crouch, gun bucking to a thunderous roar, red flame was already creeping from Johnny Orth's gun bore. Lead fanned past Orth's cheek. Then Crowden's mouth was flipping open and his big body was trembling to the savage bite of lead. For one long moment the rancher stayed on his feet, then his legs became too weary to hold his frame and he fell forward on his face.

ORTH found the girl in his arms and wasn't quite sure how she had come to be there. She was sobbing and smiling, and holding onto him so tightly he couldn't have broken away if he had wanted to.

"They called you crazy," the girl gasped, as Billy rode belatedly up the draw to join them. "They were the crazy ones. I thought you'd be killed when you let Crowden pick up his gun. I—I didn't know—"

Orth nodded and his lips brushed her hair.

"I ain't a stranger to a gun. But a gun can doom a man as well as save him. My dad found that out. Mebbe you remember how good my dad was with a gun. I was learnin' fast, too. Then he got killed in that fight in the

Diamond D Corral. Dad could have saved himself by killin' Les Hanover, the best friend Dad ever had. But Hanover was drunk—he had been framed into the fight by Vandesen's punchers. Before Dad could get out of there, he was shot bad. Before he died he made me promise not to carry a gun.

"He told me. 'Yuh may have tuh eat dirt, lad—you may have to swaller pride. Them things have a way of healin', but once dead no man can have a second try. Lay off guns, kid. Give me yore hand on it.'"

"You—you broke that promise for me?" Anna whispered.

Orth said sincerely, "Dad would have wanted me to. A gun can do good as well as bad. I'm ready for the sheriff now."

She held him tightly.

"No, Johnny, the sheriff isn't going to get you. You deserve a medal for what you've done. I'll swear my teeth out to see you free. I'm selfish, Johnny. I need help to build up the Little Two Ranch. Then there's this gold claim Dad found and was working secretly. It might pay off enough to have Billy's leg fixed up right."

Johnny Orth felt a warm glow steal over him.

"I'd shore like the job, Anna, if you believe you'd be satisfied with a crazy man."

Billy snorted.

"Crazy—like a fox. Reckon you got to stay on, Johnny, an' teach me how to use a gun."

Laughing, the three of them rode out to find the sheriff.

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TWO WANDERING WADDIES GET INTO A BARREL OF TROUBLE — BUT CLIMB OUT AGAIN WITH THE HELP OF SOME PORCUPINE QUILLS

in

PANHANDLING PUNCHERS

An Uproarious Complete Swap and Whopper Novelet

By SYL MacDOWELL

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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NO FINER DRINK EAST OR WEST OF THE ROCKIES!

BETTER TASTE... Pepsi-Cola REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. ...BIGGER DRINK

Purity...in the big big bottle — that's Pepsi-Cola!

Carter's blood ran cold as he saw Don Manuel lashing at Betty with the bull-whip

Trouble on the Rail T

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "The Whistling Waddy," "Haunted Mesa," etc.

Sheer Weight of Numbers Avail a Rustler Outfit Nothing When a Red-Headed Waddy Gets His Dander Up!

JIM CARTER snorted derisively when he saw the white horse with the silver-mounted saddle and bridle standing in front of the Rail T ranchhouse. So Don Manuel Samingo was calling on Betty Trent again, was he?

"Prob'ly tellin' her what a great hombre he is," Carter muttered disgustedly. "Most likely makin' out

he's a plumb remarkable feller. Huh! He shore is if yuh take into account them remarks he makes about his own self."

Carter was not aware that he had muttered aloud until he heard a voice in the bunkhouse door behind him drawl:

"I know a jasper who liked to scared hisself to death, talkin' to hisself like that."

The lean, auburn-haired waddy shot a quick glance over his shoulder. Old "Windy" River was standing there, grinning at him. Carter grinned, too, and went and sat down on the bench in front of the bunkhouse. Windy dropped down on the long pine board and went on, as though he had been asked to explain.

"Got so the echo of this here jasper's voice started answerin' back, I heard." Windy shook his head and his battered old Stetson slid down over an ear. "Shore must have been spooky-like." He pushed the Stetson back straight on his head. "I got to get me a new hat."

"Yuh been sayin' that for the whole ten years I've known yuh," the young waddy beside him declared. "But yuh never do it. You know yuh would not part with that old hat."

"Mebbe not." Windy's rheumy old eyes were on the white horse up at the hitch-rail in front of the ranchhouse. "Huh! And I wouldn't let no fancy 'don' like that Manuel Samingo steal my gal either."

"Betty ain't my gal," Carter said quickly, but the red flooded his tanned face to his ears. "Shucks, I'm just a hired hand with this outfit. She don't pay me no mind."

The red deepened though, as at that moment Don Manuel Samingo came down the steps of the porch and sauntered to his horse. Young Carter glowered at the man in blue Mexican costume, ornately decorated with gold braid. The don carried his big sombrero in one hand, and the bright sunlight gleamed on his curly dark hair. His smile accented his darkly handsome face, with its small, spiked mustache.

"Shore looks like a one-man parade goin' somewheres to start," grumbled Windy, his old eyes narrowing at the man who claimed to be a descendant of a long line of Spanish aristocrats. "Who is he anyways, Jim? Me, I don't believe none of that big talk of his about ancestors."

"Well, I reckon he's Don Manuel Samingo all right," Carter said. "Everybody says so—and he shore looks the 'don' part."

"Yeah," said Windy. "And I've seen a lot of cattle wearin' fancy brands, but that didn't tell me nothin' for shore about 'em. Folks around here don't really know much about this Don Samingo gent."

DON MANUEL swung into the saddle after untying the white horse and donning his ornate sombrero. He rode down to the bunkhouse and reined up in front of the two men sitting on the bench. Carter and Windy River remained stonily silent, offering no greeting, watching him.

"Senor Carter," said Don Manuel abruptly, one slender brown hand fingering the long-lashed bull-whip he always had tied to his saddle, "I must request that you no longer bother Senorita Trent with your unwanted attentions."

"And it's been so peaceful around here up to now," sighed Windy River sadly. "But now—Jim Carter, if yuh don't beat the face off this fancy-talkin' hombre I'm personally goin' to kick yuh from here to breakfast."

Jim Carter paid no attention to Windy as he rose swiftly, his eyes flashing angrily, his eyes steadily held on Don Manuel. The don sat calmly gazing back at the waddy. Neither man had a hand close to a gun.

"Miss Trent tell yuh to ask me to stop botherin' her?" Carter demanded coldly.

"Perhaps not in so many words," Don Manuel said coldly, and shrugged. "But I gathered that she would appreciate such an act on my part."

"Get down off that hoss!" snapped Carter. "I aim to teach yuh not to meddle into other people's business."

"But, no, senor." Don Manuel smiled mockingly. "I have no desire to soil my clothes in a fight with the fists."

"Get down before I pull yuh out of the saddle!" roared Carter.

He lunged toward Don Manuel—and on the instant the bull-whip in the hand of the man in the saddle flashed out. The long lash wrapped itself around Carter's left boot. A quick jerk of the whip pulled the waddy's foot from under him. Carter went down hard in a puddle of mud in front of the bunkhouse.

Don Manuel gave the whip a snap that released the lash from around Carter's ankle. "Remember what I said," he said coldly. "Do not bother Miss Trent."

He curled up the whiplash and rode away. Carter sat up cursing, and reaching for his gun. Windy River shook his head as he watched Don Manuel Samingo depart.

"Careful, Jim," Windy advised. "It ain't polite to shoot a man in the back—and that goes for polecats, sidewinders and Don Manuel."

Jim Carter flushed again, and nodded as he got to his feet. The urge to take a shot at Don Manuel had only been with him during a moment of blind rage. Jim Carter would never gun a man down except in fair fight. And as his swift rage against Don Manuel began to cool it was as quickly replaced by resentment toward Betty Trent. She must have said something, or Don Manuel would never have dared suggest that Carter's attentions were unwelcome to the girl.

Wordless, but seething with anger, young Carter wiped the mud off his clothing. The old waddy gave him a hand, but neither man said anything until Carter was fairly presentable again.

But Jim Carter had been doing a lot of thinking, remembering the times he had gone riding over the range with pretty Betty Trent. He remembered how the sunlight had brought out the red and the gold in her hair. She had acted as if she enjoyed being with him, too, but now he realized she had never said so. He had just felt that she did. And what had just happened certainly showed that he had been badly mistaken.

"I'm quittin' the outfit, Windy," he announced shortly. "If Betty don't want me around I'll shore see she ain't bothered none by my obnoxious presence."

"By yore what?" asked Windy.

"Obnoxious presence," repeated Carter. "Meanin' something yuh don't like."

Windy frowned. "Well," he said, "mebbe. But if I was you I'd go up to the house and have me a little talk with Betty before I got too proddy. Me, I wouldn't take Don Manuel's word it was rainin' if the drops was patterin' in my face. How yuh know he wasn't lying? Mebbe he—"

HE BROKE off abruptly as a rider loomed into view, his horse headed toward them at a fast gallop. The two men looked at each other anxiously as they recognized John Trent's big steel-gray mount.

"That's Trent," snapped Carter. "And he shore is excited about somethin', from the way he's ridin'. Where are the rest of the outfit this mornin', Windy?"

"Steve and Hap and some of the other boys are fixing fence over in the south forty," said Windy. "Buck and

Thompson rode out with the boss to get some of that wild stock out of the brush over north. Joe Fenton drove into town with the wagon for supplies."

"Buck and Thompson ain't with the boss now," Carter declared anxiously. "Looks like trouble, Windy."

The lean, middle-aged owner of the Rail T outfit was waving at the two men in front of the bunkhouse and shouting something, but they could not distinguish his words. Not until Trent's horse galloped close were they finally able to understand what he was saying.

"Drygulchers!" they made out his shouted words then. "Downed Buck Lanch, and Bill Thompson. They're both dead. I just managed to get away!" He reined in his horse and slid out of saddle. "The killers stole a bunch of two-year-olds we'd just rounded up."

Betty Trent, who evidently had seen her father's hasty arrival, came running from the house. She was a slender, lovely girl, who was at her best in riding clothes such as she wore, and a worried expression was on her pretty face as she stopped her panting run in front of the bunkhouse.

"What's wrong, Dad?" she demanded.

"Drygulchers, Betty," Jim Carter said before John Trent could answer.

"I didn't ask you, Mr. Carter," Betty said coldly. "I prefer to talk to my father if you don't mind."

"Sorry, Miss Trent." Carter turned away, a sudden bitter expression on his strong young face. "Reckon Don Manuel must have been tellin' it true," he added as coldly as she had spoken.

"Don Manuel always tells the truth," Betty flared. "And he—"

"Never mind him," Trent broke in crustily. "There's business to be done. Jim, you and Windy saddle up and ride over north—see if yuh can trail them drygulchers."

Windy headed for the corral, and Jim Carter had started to follow when he halted abruptly. He glanced at Betty, but she quickly turned her head away, holding it haughtily high. Young Carter walked back to Trent.

"Sorry, Boss," he said quickly, "but I'm quittin' the outfit right now. I don't aim to hang around a place where I ain't welcome."

"Quitting!" Betty turned on him, her eyes flashing. "It couldn't be because you are afraid of drygulchers, could it, Jim Carter?"

"No, it couldn't," Carter said coldly.

"Forget about quitting now, Jim." John Trent placed his hand on the waddy's shoulder in a friendly gesture. "Two of the outfit have been killed and I need yuh. We'll argue about the rest of it after this trouble is tended to."

Jim Carter nodded slowly. "Reckon I'll stick since yuh put it that way, Boss," he said.

Windy appeared from the cavvy corral riding one horse and leading another, saddled and ready, a horse from Jim's own string. With another shrug and without even so much as another glance at Betty, he swung into leather. The two men rode off, heading in search of the drygulchers.

"Not much chance of findin' them sidewinders waitin' around," Windy observed, as they rode through the mesquite. "But we might read sign and learn which way they took the stock they stole."

"Hope so," said Carter. "Shore is too bad about Buck and Bill."

"Wish I'd paid Bill Thompson that two bucks I owed him," mourned Windy. "Feel kind of bad about it now."

CARTER did not smile. He understood. He, too, had liked Lanch and Thompson, a pair of top hands who had been with the Rail T outfit for nearly five years. It was strange to think of them as dead. Jim Carter was impulsively ashamed of himself

for even having thought of quitting the outfit before the killers of those two men had been rounded up.

Windy and Jim Carter rode along the bed of a dry wash, then swung into a section of brush country. They rode warily, keen eyes missing nothing of their surroundings and constantly on the alert for any sign of danger.

"There's the boys!"

Windy's voice was harsh with suppressed emotion as he gazed at the two still figures sprawled out close to a handful of big boulders. They rode closer to the two bodies and swung out of their saddles.

From the top of the mesa to their left came a sudden movement, but neither of them saw it in time. Old Windy pitched forward on his face as a bullet caught him in the head. The whip-like crack of a rifle was a vicious sound in the hot silence. Jim Carter dropped to the ground and rolled behind the nearest boulder.

"Windy!" he muttered tightly, with a hurting choke in his throat. He scrambled to his knees and peered around the edge of the big rock at the still pitiful figure of the old waddy. "So long, old-timer. Yuh won't never get that new hat yuh always was talkin' about, will yuh?"

A bullet from the drygulcher on the mesa whined through the air and smashed against the boulder. Carter cursed softly as he drew his six-gun. If he could only get a chance! Not only for himself now, but he was thinking also of Windy and those two boys lying dead out there.

It was about seventy-five yards from the boulders to the top of the cliff. Long range for accurate shooting with a revolver and Carter knew it, but he set his lips grimly, and waited for that single chance for which he was praying.

The man with the rifle seemed to be carelessly sure he was out of six-gun range. He was clearly visible as he stood up, the rifle in his hands. Carter steadied his arm against the boulder and took careful aim. The Colt roared and the shot proved a lucky one—the answer to Jim Carter's prayer! For the bullet caught the drygulcher in the chest. He swayed for an instant, and then went hurtling down through space.

"Didn't figger on downin' that coyote with just one shot," Jim Carter muttered grimly. "Windy, old-timer, yuh musta been helpin' then."

He thrust his gun back into the right holster. He was wearing two guns, one on either hip, and stepped out from behind the big rock. He felt strangely lonely and heartsick as he stood there beside the three dead men. He was sure that John Trent would be sending some of the other men from the outfit out with a wagon to gather up the bodies and bring them in, so there was no need for his tarrying longer. He made sure that Windy was actually dead, then went to the waiting horses.

Carter's mount and that of the old waddy had been broken to the sound of gunfire and they had stood ground-hitched during all of the shooting. Carter swung into saddle and headed his roan toward the foot of the mesa cliff, for he wanted to learn the identity of the drygulcher.

The killer had fallen face up, and the drop over the cliff had not battered the body up to such an extent that it was not recognizable. Carter scowled as he sat in the saddle gazing down at the hard face. He had seen the man before somewhere, but could not recall where, or who the drygulcher had been.

JIM CARTER slid out of leather, dropping the reins beside the roan's head, meaning to search the dead man's clothing in the hope of finding some means of identification. And abruptly the waddy whirled as he heard a shrill scream in a girl's

voice. It came from behind a clump of trees over to the west. He dashed in the direction of the sound and as he swung through the trees his blood ran cold at what he saw. Betty Trent and Don Manuel Samingo! But it was not the sight of them alone that roused Jim Carter to scarlet fury, but what was going on before he could race forward to stop it.

Betty and Don Manuel were mounted. The Mexican had grabbed the bridle of the girl's horse with his left hand, and with his right he was lashing out at her with the bull-whip! Screaming, Betty was shrinking back from him, her eyes filled with horror unspeakable.

"You will do as I say," snarled Don Manuel. "It is unfortunate that you happened to ride into the canyon and heard me giving orders to my men who had stolen the cattle. I had to chase you, but now that I have caught you, you will never get away again."

"You lying rustler!" Betty cried furiously. "Let go of my horse!"

"Be still!" Again Don Manuel lashed out at her with the whip. "I will teach you to listen to Don Manuel!"

"Drop that whip!" snapped Jim Carter, as he leaped from the shielding trees. A gun in his hand was up, glinting death. "Drop it, I say!"

With a snarl, Don Manual dropped the whip and his grip on the bridle of Betty's horse. His right hand flashed down to his gun, just as Betty's frightened, released horse leaped forward, leaving the two men facing each other.

Carter's gun roared, and his bullet caught Don Manuel in the right arm. The gun dropped from a nerveless hand as the Mexican rustler leader howled in pain, and dug spurs into his white horse. Don Manuel rode away at a gallop. Carter aimed at the retreating man, as the angry blood made things dance redly before his eyes, then he lowered the gun. He couldn't shoot even Don Manuel in the back. Poor old Windy had been right.

"Let him go, Jim," Betty said, her voice choking. "Oh, Jim, I've been so wrong—so wrong! But I never even guessed what an idiot I'd been until I heard Don Manuel order his men to raid our ranch! I was trying to get back there and warn Dad. He's alone on the spread, waiting for the men to come in. We've got to get there at once!"

"Head for home!" cried Carter. "I'll foller as soon as I get my hoss."

Whirling her mount, Betty rode away at a gallop. Carter raced back to where he had left his horse at the foot of the mesa. And with all he had to think of at that moment, with all his bitter fury at Don Manuel for daring to touch Betty with that cruel whip-lash, it was odd that that was the moment he should recall where he had seen the dead drygulcher, in life. The man had been with Don Manuel Samingo! That explained a lot.

Jim Carter flung himself into saddle and dashed after Betty. But she was riding so fast he was unable to catch up with her before she reached the Rail T.

She had just leaped out of saddle and run into the ranchhouse when a group of riders appeared, coming on fast. Immediately, they spied Carter, and guns started roaring. He ducked lower in his saddle, urging his roan to greater speed. He outraced them, though bullets whistled dangerously close as he reached the house and pounded up the porch steps.

BETTY and her father were firing from the upstairs windows of the two-story home. Carter slammed the front door, bolted it, and leaped up the stairs. In the upper hall he darted through the nearest open door. Shooting a glance through a window, he saw that the rustlers had been only

moments behind him, and now were circling the ranchhouse, Indian fashion.

He fired, heard a wild yell, and saw a man drop out of saddle. Then Betty came rushing into the room with a big Colt in her hand.

"Dad's wounded in the right arm," she said quickly. "He can't shoot very well with his left, but he's trying."

"I'll go look after him," Carter said, and started across the room.

He was hidden by the partly open door as Don Manuel appeared at the portal, a sinister expression on his dark face, and his dark eyes fixed on Betty.

HE HAD evidently entered the house through the back door. There had been no time for Carter to look after that entrance.

With a leap, Jim Carter was on Don Manuel, grabbing him by the throat. He shoved the outlaw leader across the room and pushed him roughly, flat on his back, across the window sill.

Holding Don Manuel half out the window with a grim, iron grip, Carter fired at the raiders outside with the gun in his left hand while Betty, beside him at the window, also kept up a steady fire.

"Call off them men of yores or I'll kill yuh!" Carter growled menacingly to the Mexican, then raised his voice. "Stop raidin' this spread yuh black-hearted coyotes, or Don Manuel gets killed!"

The answer was jeering shouts and more roaring of the guns from the men circling the house. They didn't seem to care what happened to their leader. Hopelessly outnumbered, it was beginning to look like the end for the desperate defenders. Then Carter's heart leaped as a group of riders loomed into view. They raced into battle with six-guns booming. The Rail T waddies were arriving, and bringing men from other ranches with them.

In a few minutes it was all over. Those of the rustler band who had not been killed had been captured. Only then did Carter learn that Joe Fenton, the Rail T waddy who had gone to town for supplies, had also brought back the ranch payroll. Don Manuel had known that, and had ordered his men to raid in order to get the money.

As soon as Fenton had arrived John Trent had sent him to round up the other men and nearby ranchers, to go after the stolen cattle. All of them had arrived for orders, just in time to save the defenders of the ranchhouse.

With Don Manuel still covered with his gun, Jim Carter demanded:

"What did this rustler sidewinder tell yuh about me when he was callin' this mornin', Betty?"

"He said you had been boasting that I was crazy about you," said Betty. "And I believed him."

"And he told me that you wanted him to tell me not to bother yuh any more," Carter said, with a wry smile. "Looks like this hombre is remarkable—a remarkable liar."

When some of the waddies took Don Manuel away and Carter and Betty were alone, Betty said rather shyly:

"I'm mighty sorry I was so mean to you, Jim. But hearing that you were boasting about my being crazy about you made me mad."

"Reckon it would," said Carter, and there was tender longing in his eyes as he murmured, "But I shore wish it was true."

"That's what made me so angry," said Betty softly. "It is true."

Jim Carter stared at her for an instant, then with a loud whoop he swept her into his arms. Her eyes were shining as she raised her face for the kiss that made any more words between them unnecessary.

Kelso "reached" but the wrong way as he shot at a window

Little Bitter

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Gun Blaster," "Wagon Cowboy," etc.

Outlaws May Steal His Grub and Yearlings, But a Young Would-be Homesteader Hangs on to His Courage!

"LITTLE BITTER" THOMPSON was not licked. He should have been, but he was not. Weeks of driving fourteen head of obstreperous young cattle over hill and dale and desert, single-handed, had gaunted him almost to bean-pole slimness. He had driven a pony to death. His eyes were red and aching from lack of sleep. Still, he was not licked.

Somewhere in that strange, wild country he would find a little range to settle upon and call his own. It just had to be.

Then he drove his small herd through a narrow pass in a chain of forbidding rock hills, and there it was —a steep-walled, well-watered basin a mile in length and nearly that in width. An ideal range!

He noted that the grass was virgin, sat up in his saddle and grinned. But there was more. Off to his right, in a grove of oaks, stood an ancient log house. One corner of the roof had

never been finished, for the ranchman builder had not been able to bear the lonesomeness of the place, and quit it early. Loneliness? The youthful discoverer scarcely knew the meaning of the word.

He left his pack-mules and his yearlings tearing into the lush grass and rode toward the house.

There was a joker in the deck. Off beyond the sun-blasted old log pile a dozen horses were picketed. Little Bitter guessed quickly that this was an owlhooter hideway. A huge red-faced man, with pale, mean eyes and a stubbly beard came stalking out to the front gallery with a six-shooter workwise in his hand.

"Who are you, kid, and what yuh doin' here?" he demanded.

Little Bitter reined in two rods away. That heavy face was familiar to him, somehow. Then he remembered that he had seen it on reward posters back in the Sabado City section. He remembered the man's name too—"Red Ace" Munroe, bandit and multiple killer.

"My name," he quietly answered, "is Thompson. Raised on Little Bitter Creek, long ways east of here. No kin, kicked around, took to fightin' and earned me a bad name. Saved my cowboy pay and bought fourteen calves—yearlin's now. No range for 'em, so I struck out huntin' one. All kinds of hard luck. Pony died on me, for one thing. Back in Sabado City a man who had knowed my dad was kind enough to gimme this bay hoss I'm ridin' now. Reckon that's all."

"Yuh can't stay here, kid," Red Ace growled. "Yuh can't—"

"I wouldn't bother yuh none," Little Bitter cut in. "We could be friendly, couldn't we?"

Munroe had begun swearing when a tall, lean, dark man stepped out of the old house. Thompson knew him, too, from pictures on reward posters. Irby Kelso, he was, Red Ace's first lieutenant and chief advisor—in short, the brains of the gang.

"That young 'un mustn't leave here, Red, knowin' what he knows," Kelso said. "This is the only rest we've had in a year, and we're not goin' to spoil it." He pointed out toward the gap. "See them two pack-mules? Grub. See them young cows? Gaunted, but good, fresh beef at that. Won't keep over a day or two, but they's a dozen or more of 'em. . . . You, kid, hop down offa that hoss and fetch me yore gun!"

A SIX-SHOOTER had come into his hand as though by magic. Little Bitter Thompson saw the inside of the cold steel muzzle and was wise. Great as were his chagrin and disappointment, he made himself grin as he passed his old range Colt to Irb Kelso. A devil-may-care manner was best here, he decided.

Ace Munroe barked orders, and hard-faced men poured out of the front doorway. Three of them went to rope and butcher a Thompson yearling; two rode off to make sure the stranger kid had no companions; two others went to bring in the Thompson pack-mules.

Munroe swore a streak when he found only hard rations in Little Bitter's grub packs, though he should have known that he would find nothing else. Outwardly meek enough—but with fire smoldering far back in his eye—Little Bitter asked if he might not unroll his blankets in the house and grab shuteye for awhile.

When he woke the night was well along, and it was black dark. From everywhere inside the log house came sounds of snoring. A stale but still savory odor of broiled beefsteak permeated the atmosphere. As he sat up on his blankets he heard a low bass voice:

"Lay back down there, kid. Yuh ain't goin' nowhere."

"I'm shore hungry," complained Little Bitter Thompson.

The voice of the one man on guard was a little sharper.

"Lay back down there. Yuh ain't goin' nowhere, didn't I just tell yuh!"

Young Thompson boiled inside. They had taken his grub packs, had butchered one of his prized yearlings and would eventually butcher the rest, yet he was denied any part of this food. Worse, his dream of a cow outfit of his own had evaporated.

He obeyed the guard, muttering casually: "What's the name of this dang place, anyhow, pardner?"

"Tombstone Hole," the guard threw over to him spitefully. "And mebbe yuh'll find it's a fittin' name 'fore yuh're through with it."

Following this, there was silence except for the snoring.

Little Bitter remembered that he'd had two dollars, and reached to see whether they were gone. They had taken even his old pocketknife.

For an hour then he lay there motionless in the dark, peering through the nearest window and thinking, absentmindedly watching the stars as they passed as though in review for his especial benefit. The bowl of the Big Dipper edged into his line of vision, and by this he knew that the night was three-fourths spent.

Suddenly he stiffened on his blankets, held his breath and listened. He had heard snoring in a new key. The sentry, too, was sleeping now!

Little Bitter arose without the least noise and eased himself up, straddling the windowsill. As he was about to drop lightly to the ground outside, his trousers caught on a protruding bent nail, and there was a slight tearing sound. He froze, listening. But none of the outlaw bunch had been startled awake. He worked the nail out of the wood to get his pants loose, dropped to the grass under the window, knelt there and again measured time by the position of the Big Dipper in the north-northwestern sky.

It was later than he had thought. Only two hours until daybreak, he figured, and a two-hours' start on a horse as worn as his bay would not be enough. They would track him down and kill him, be done with him, making sure that he didn't get away to carry news of their whereabouts.

He looked down at the bent nail, dim there in his palm. And a grin widened his mouth a trifle.

Licked? Licked, like fun! He never would be licked. . . .

AT SUNRISE, Red Ace Munroe walked over to Little Bitter Thompson and prodded him ungently with the toe of a boot. Little Bitter sat up rubbing his eyes quite as though he had been sound asleep.

"Think yuh're gonna lay around here and not do anything?" the big red-haired, red-faced man snarled. "Go help with breakfast!"

Little Bitter was not sorry to do that, for in helping with breakfast he would manage to satisfy his own hunger. He knew how to cook; especially steaks.

A cook-stove was left in the old house, along with a cot beneath the window, and a few chairs. Kelso slept on the cot; the others rolled up in blankets. Thompson cleaned the top of the stove, got it smoking hot, and broiled steaks finely half a dozen at a time, so that only half the ruffian band had to wait.

"Smart young feller," observed Irb Kelso, greasy-mouthed. "He can do the cookin from now on."

"Right," growled Red Ace.

The raw irony of this was hardly lost upon Little Bitter Thompson. Not only were they going to eat his little herd, but he would have to cook it for them! That is, unless something happened. Well, as long as he was cooking for them he wouldn't be shot or otherwise disposed of, and he himself could eat.

Occasionally during that weary day of servitude there was a twinkle in Little Bitter's eye over the thought that was in his mind. One twenty-year-old kid armed only with a bent

nail bucking twelve of the toughest hombres west of the Pecos!

All would depend, of course, upon how the nail was used.

Into the basin called Tombstone Hole, just before daybreak, crept an even score of armed men. They had left their horses a little way behind, in order that whinnying might not betray their presence. Objects were just becoming plain in the dawnlight when Red Ace Munroe sat up on his cot and nudged Irb Kelso.

"Somethin's wrong, Irb," Ace whispered uneasily. "Dunno what it is, but somethin's shore wrong."

It was his abnormal nose for danger. He jerked his big sandy head around and saw that Little Bitter Thompson was still there. Thompson had just sneaked a six-shooter from the belt of the man who slept closest to him, had it hidden under his hat, but Ace could not guess that.

Irb Kelso got up. Ace Munroe was already up, and both men were fully dressed, as they had been when they had gone to sleep. But as Irb clapped on his hat, and before he could speak, every outer doorway and every window of the old log house showed menacing weapons outside.

"Reach toward the rafters," the leader of these men was barking. "This is the law, Ace!"

Kelso reached, but the wrong way. The movement was so fast that it seemed sleight-of-hand, as he shot at a window across his cot. But Little Bitter also was fast, and he shot first. He broke Kelso's shoulder, and saved the life of a first-class lawman. Then officer and posse were inside, collecting weapons, snapping on manacles.

"Worked just right, Sheriff," young Thompson said, laughing now, as he confronted the officer and the two bandit kingpins. "They've only killed two o' my yearlin's."

"Yuh'll be well paid for 'em out o' the rewards, young buckaroo," the lawman said. "Yuh didn't have a pencil, eh?"

"Didn't even have a pocket-knife," said Thompson. "They'd took it. So I used the point of a bent nail. I—"

"Yur young devil!" venomously snarled Munroe. "How'd yuh do it?"

Again the kid laughed.

"Plumb simple, red feller. Yuh wasn't real smart. Hadn't even missed my hoss, which I turned loose night before last with a message scratched on the saddle, askin' the law to come to Tombstone Hole. Know how hosses will go home, don't yuh? I wasn't fool enough to tell yuh that the Sabado City man who'd been kind enough to gimme that hoss was this same sheriff yuh're lookin' at now!"

THE LOANED

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "The Eagles Fly High," "The Last Groundup," etc.

The jug made a direct hit on Whalefoot McWhortle's round, hard skull

Anything Can Happen when Swap and Whopper Tangle with a Sheepherder, a Hungry Bear, a Money Tree and Tricky Rustlers!

CHAPTER I

Sheep Thief

WINTER deadfalls still littered the trail. But it was well-marked and easy to follow because a band of sheep had passed along it recently. The lingering, crusted snowdrifts were pitted with their tracks, blurred and misshapen by the alternate thawing and freezing of early spring.

Two riders followed the trail now in an aimless way that showed they had no particular destination. The one in front, on a cheese-colored roan, was "Whopper" Whaley, the uncrowned champion of western liars. He kept his long, knobby nose pointed straight ahead, not because he was

RANGER

A Swap and Whopper Novelet

interested in sheep, but because he had his mournful eye fixed on a long meadow ahead that looked like a good camp site.

Behind him on a bay-sorrel, an amazing animal with a black mane and silver tail, rode his little, pumpkin-faced pardner, "Swap" Bootle. Unlike his lean, hungry friend, Swap displayed a lively interest in their surroundings, even in the sheep sign, although he was a horse-trading cowpuncher by profession, when he worked at it.

"The way I got it figgered," he remarked, "is that some sheepherder pushed his stock up here in the Big Windies a month ahead o' grazin' season so's tuh beat the cattlemen in a race for the mountain grass."

WHOPPER

Whopper nodded glumly.

"Fust tuh graze it, claims it, that's the old rule," he agreed.

They were passing through a stretch of dark, gloomy fir when Swap suddenly reined up.

"Look!" he chirped, pointing into the shadowy timber.

Whopper craned around. A weak bleat guided his gaze. The plaintive appeal came again. He saw a thin, wobbly-legged lamb. It was coming toward him. But he didn't stop.

"Mutton supper for some coyote," he said unfeelingly.

"Hold on, Whopper!" protested his little pardner. "It's a cold, hungry stray, same as us! And it's lost!"

"That little wooly couldn't travel a mile."

SWAP promptly peeled himself from saddle. He approached the lone, forlorn lamb with outstretched hand. He gathered it up with sympathetic murmurs and returned to his horse.

Whopper stopped now and turned.

"Yuh aim tuh lug that critter in yore arms?" he croaked incredulously.

"Why not? We'll find the sheep camp down yonder and return it to its maw."

"And then what?"

"Mebbe the grateful sheepherder will ask us tuh supper."

"Ain't yuh got no pride?" sniffed Whopper.

"Not when all the grub we got left is here in one corner o' my saddlebag."

Eating was Whopper's favorite pastime. He produced a slab of plugcut from his hip pocket and nibbled off a thoughtful bite as he reconsidered.

"Well," he finally decided, "it's stoopin' purty low tuh accept hospitality from a sheepherder. But if he plumb insists, I reckon we can flatter him with our presence."

So they rode on. They passed the firs and neared the meadow. Presently, in a fringe of budding aspen beside a creek they spied a dirty tent. In front of the tent was a smouldering campfire. Over it hung a smudged pot simmering with a delicious aroma that drifted down the wind.

Whopper sniffed like a starved wolf. But he was wary as a wolf, too. He halted by the timber edge, letting Swap take the lead. Smugly self-righteous, Swap reined towards the camp. The bay-sorrel had taken only a few steps when an object that looked like a red blanket spread over a stump came to life and stood up.

The object turned out to be a man, obviously the sheepherder. He was no midget. What had seemed to be a red blanket was his gaudy mackinaw shirt, and a half-acre of beard that was even redder. It looked like a game preserve in the autumn. He had been stirring the contents of the pot. He gaped for a moment, dropped a long-handled spoon and dived into the tent.

He reappeared with the biggest, longest gun that Swap and Whopper had ever seen. It clacked loudly in the thin, high air as he levered a load into it. He threw the weapon to his shoulder and without a word of warning, fired.

The lofty summit of the Big

Windies almost toppled from the thunderous report. The lamb dropped from Swap's arms. A fog of gunsmoke hid man and tent for a second. When it cleared he was throwing another cartridge the size of a cucumber into the gun.

"Stop, sheep thief!" he bellowed.

The command came a little late for Whopper. It was doubtful if the sheepherder even saw him. He plunged into the timber before the first shot. Now Swap streaked after him. He grabbed for his hat but clutched empty air instead. A slug of lead had mowed off the brim above his right ear.

The gun boomed again, wholly eliminating any hope of his being a supper guest at that sheep camp. It also eliminated the left side of Swap's hatbrim, leaving him only the streamlined crown that aided his arrowlike flight into the trees and out of sight.

There was a loss even more serious. Swap's saddle-bag, containing the last meager remnant of their food, caught on a snag and tore loose from his saddle.

All he had left was his shattered pride and his tattered hat. He was not even sure that he had a pardner any more until, after about two miles of fast going, he burst into a small clearing beside a spring.

HERE Whopper had paused in front of a small log cabin. He was out of saddle, leaning shakily against the cheese-colored roan while he gnawed off another bite of plugcut to replace the chew he had inadvertently swallowed, as he sometimes did in the stress of excitement.

"This hoss is shore a hard one tuh hold when he gits his neck bowed," he apologized. "Was the lamb glad tuh git back to its maw?"

Swap sized up the cabin instead of answering. The loose stone chimney stood stark and cold. There was no sign of recent occupation. But on a

SWAP

slab nailed to the door, lettered with a hot iron, was the announcement:

FOREST RANGER
Summer Headquarters

He piled off the bay-sorrel and kicked open the door. There was a bare table, two benches, straw-filled wall bunks one above the other. A dishpan and some cooking utensils hung around the fireplace. In a dim corner beyond it was a screen-fronted cupboard.

Swap went inside and prodded into the cupboard and uttered a glad yelp of discovery.

"Canned grub, flour, coffee, everything! Bring in some kindling, Whopper, and start a fire!"

In their long wanderings the pardners had become expert at making themselves at home anywhere. Before sundown they had a feast spread out. The horses were picketed up beyond the spring thicket. The fireplace lighted the cabin with a cheery glow.

"This shore beats any sheep camp," gloated Whopper, lopping a long leg over a bench and settling down to two-handed eating.

"And we're welcome tuh stay till the ranger comes," Swap said. "We ain't got a care or worry of any sort."

He was over-optimistic. He had barely blown his first cup of coffee when hoofs thudded across the clearing. Swap leaped up, scuttled to the door and peered out cautiously through a crack.

He turned, his round, shiny face aghast.

"Good night!" he groaned. "It—it's the big sheepherder! He—he looks meaner than ever!"

Whopper noisily gulped down a flapjack.

"Mebbe he's come tuh thank yuh for rescuin' that lamb," he suggested hopefully.

"He's packin' that ol' buffalo gun!" mumbled Swap. He left the door, dashed for a bunk, dived in and burrowed deep in the straw. "It's up tuh you tuh accept his expressions o' gratitude an' regret, Whopper! Yuh always had an oily tongue!"

They heard their caller leap from his horse and stride to the door. He walloped it with a sledge-hammer fist. Whopper was cornered. There was no exit from the cabin except up the chimney. He didn't feel equal to that with a crackling fire burning. In fact, he had never felt more unequal in his life.

He left the table, angled to the door and opened it partly, most of him shielded behind it.

"Howdy, friend!" Whopper piped weakly.

The sheepherder clawed his whiskers and pierced him with a hard stare that would have chipped enamel from a teapot.

"A new one, huh?" he queried gruffly.

It was plain that he mistook Whopper for a ranger. But he gave him no chance to explain. No chance whatsoever.

"It's about time!" he growled. "I ripped last year's ranger apart an' braided him like rawhide for lettin' cattle in on my sheep ground! I hope he told yuh!"

CHAPTER II

Whalefoot McWhortle

BUT the enormous sheepman had not come to indulge in sweet memories. He shifted the gun to his other arm and leaned against the doorframe.

"My name's McWhortle," he boomed. "Whalefoot McWhortle, they call me, on account of when I step on a man I squash him out flat as a halibut. And that's what I aim tuh do when I find the scoundrel who undertook tuh rustle one o' my sheep a little while back."

Whopper ran a nervous hand across his mouth.

"Ain't been nobody passed this way," he truthfully informed his visitor.

McWhortle's one inch of slanting forehead crinkled suspiciously.

"His tracks led up this way!" he rumbled. "I'd have plugged him if smoke hadn't got in my eyes!"

Whopper breathed easier, thus realizing he had not been glimpsed down on the meadow trail.

"Don't go actin' loose an' impulsive, Mister McWhortle," he requested. "If yuh ketch the culprit, turn him over tuh me."

"Yuh're the spindliest-lookin' cuss I've seen in a long spell," sneered Whalefoot McWhortle.

"Been ailin' a little," Whopper explained humbly. "Is there anything else I kin do for you, Mister McWhortle?"

"Yeah, there is!"

The sheepman went to his horse. A huge jug hung from the saddle horn. It seemed heavy but he lifted it down with a little finger and deposited it on the doorstep. Whopper peered at it in honest bewilderment.

"It—it's marked 'Black Strap Molasses,'" he said.

"That's exackly what it is!" chortled

the big sheepman. "It's a gallon o' larrup and in it is two hundred dollars in pennies, dimes an' quarters!"

"Two hundred dollars! What's it for?"

"It's my grazin' fee, at two-bits per head! I'm payin' yuh now and cinchin' my grass, savvy?"

It struck Whopper as an unusual method of making a payment. Whalefoot McWhortle was enjoying his confusion.

"It'll give yuh something tuh do, pickin' the small change out o' the larrup!" he snickered. "And it shows what I think o' you forest service wallopers!"

Whopper reached down and set the jug inside. The presence of money, whomever it belonged to, lifted his spirits. His gift of glorified gab came back to him.

"Much obliged, Mister McWhortle. And I reckon I'd better not stand here in the draught, on account of ailin' a little, like I said. Just a touch of—of smallpox. Won't yuh step inside, Mister McWhortle?"

That artistic touch had instant and gratifying results. With a whoop of alarm McWhortle fled. He scrambled onto his horse and thumped it into a run with the massive gun barrel, down through the clearing, back to his meadow camp.

Whopper closed the door and returned to the table. Swap hissed cautiously from his hideout in the upper bunk:

"Is he gone?"

"For good," beamed Whopper. "And we're set for a spell o' pleasant livin'."

So he forked a stack of flapjacks onto his plate and reached for the molasses jug. The problem of what to do with the two hundred dollars in it could be settled later.

THE spell of pleasant living so confidently predicted by Whopper ended early next morning. Swap dangled a foot and kicked him awake.

"What's all the commotion outside, Whopper?" he whispered.

Whopper hoisted his bare feet to the floor and padded to the door. Even before he opened it he heard cattle. The clearing was full of them. In the distance two riders slapped rope ends at the beef. He saw that as he flung the door open and found himself face to face with a neat, intelligent-looking stranger with a knife-brimmed Stetson and olive-green uniform. The stranger lifted an inquisitive and appraising eyebrow.

"Mornin'. Mighty near walked in on you. Wasn't expecting company, hardly."

"Me neither," blinked Whopper, "but I'm used tuh surprises. Them yore cows?"

"I helped Ike Witherby herd 'em up from below. He's grazing the mountains this season. Was pretty anxious to get in here first."

Whopper ran a foot up and down one chilly shin. He saw that there was going to be complications. He left the door and climbed into his pants so he could think better. He was pulling on a boot when a second man appeared at the doorway. He wore cowman clothes. But even those failed to make him an impressive figure. He was thin, smallish and timid-eyed.

"This is Mister Witherby," introduced the ranger. "He's been troubled by a outfit on the other side of the mountains. He was scared for a minute that you had something to do with that outfit."

"Wh-what outfit?" Whopper asked, knowing beforehand that the question was superfluous.

"McWhortle's."

"Yuh m-mean Whalefoot McWhortle, the sheepman?"

Ike Witherby made bold to enter and sidle toward a bench.

"I seen yore two hosses," he said in a squeaky voice. "I says to myself, them ain't sheepherder hosses."

"Thanks for the compliment, friend. Me, I'm a jobless cowpuncher."

Witherby shot a glance at the ranger.

"Here's just the man yuh want," he declared.

The ranger's eye caught a movement in the upper bunk. And he took notice of a second pair of saddle-heeled boots.

"There's two of 'em," he deduced. "And from the way he don't like to get out of bed, I'd say they're both cowhands."

Swap yipped at them and lowered a foot, grinning apologetically.

"Mighty obliged for a night's rest, Mister Ranger," he said. "Me and my pardner'll be gittin' along right after breakfast."

"Hold on," the ranger said briskly, "might be I can use you both."

Whopper got restless. He could smell the offer of a job. He didn't believe in work if it could be avoided.

"Mebbe we better skip breakfast," he started to say. "I'll go saddle up."

The ranger blocked the doorway.

"You said you were out of a job, cowboy. You were wrong."

WHOPPER poked out his wishbone and tried to look important.

"That was just a slip o' the tongue, Mister Ranger. Fact is, I'm retired. Ever hear o' Professor Whaley's Nerve Tonic? Me, I'm—"

"Now I know he's yore man!" Ike Witherby shrilled enthusiastically at the ranger. "The job calls for more nerve than good sense!"

"A job that fits him to a T, I'd say. Hold up your right hand, Professor Whaley."

If Whopper had known what was coming next he would have greatly preferred putting that hand in a steel-jawed trap.

The ranger said briskly:

"I hereby deputize you as Special Ranger Whaley, and the small-sized party up there in the bunk as your assistant."

Whopper lowered his hand limply.

"Just wh-what is our duties?"

"Escorting Mister Witherby's cows. And hazing off any sheep that horn in on their range."

The ranger now set about getting a breakfast out of what remained of his supplies. But Whopper lost interest. His appetite had abandoned him completely. Getting that jugful of sticky change back to Whalefoot McWhortle was going to be one sweet job.

CHAPTER III

Not By a Jugful

WHOPPER pulled himself together over a cup of black coffee. With a chew of plugcut for a chaser, he got his wits in working order and found some solace in reflecting that Swap was his assistant. He thereby devised a plan for unsaddling his responsibility onto his little pardner, just as the uniformed ranger had unloaded the Whalefoot McWhortle war onto him.

He got his small friend aside.

"Now look here, Assistant Special Ranger Bootle," he said grandly, "one of us has got tuh ride down tuh the sheep camp."

"I just now tied that molasses jug ontuh yore saddle."

"Without orders? Forgot I'm yore superior now?"

"We always been pardners, share and share alike."

"Well, we still are," Whopper said. "I took Mister McWhortle's money. That's why I claim it's yore job tuh take it back."

But Whopper's power of persuasion was not equal to this crisis.

"Yuh better chase along with that molasses jug and make believe it's nerve tonic when yuh meet up with

Mister McWhortle," Swap stated firmly. "Mebbe yuh're my superior, but that don't make me yore inferior, Whopper Whaley. Besides which, I didn't take any oath o' malfeasance, like you did. And yuh better git started before Mister McWhortle sights some Witherby cows and comes investigatin'."

Whopper heaved a stricken sigh. He got the cheese-colored roan and set foot in stirrup. But before he could mount, the impulsive, soft-hearted Swap took pity on him.

"I'll dangle along with yuh as far as where I dropped the saddle-bag," he agreed. "If we decide tuh light out of here in a hurry we'll need what's in it."

So they rode together out of the clearing, toward the scene of near-disaster the afternoon before. The boss ranger and Ike Witherby, sitting on the sunny side of the cabin, watched their departure with satisfaction.

"I didn't figure on McWhortle bein' in this vicinity again," said the ranger.

"You ain't scared o' McWhortle, are yuh?"

The man in ranger uniform scowled abruptly.

"I'm afraid o' no man. I'm one o' the slickest rustlers in the business. When I kill a man I always see that his body turns up. That's why they call me Habeas Corpus Jones. As for that mangy sheepman, while we're pushin' them wet cattle through, we'll run off his woolies over his dead body!"

"Sounds swell," piped Witherby. "While Curliss and Hortin haze the beef, we'll take the woolies."

THE meadow was cloaked with dew that glittered like precious gems in the morning sun as Swap and Whopper cantered toward the sheep camp a little later. Whopper saw the sheep at once. And a moving mass of red at their heels assured him that Whalefoot McWhortle was faithfully tending his flock and not lurking around camp waiting to murder somebody.

Whopper boldly spurred the cheese-colored roan and made for the smudged, sagging tent. There he dismounted and swung down the jug with a charred stick from the fire. He left a message for the monster sheepman on the side of the tent. It read:

Dere Sur:

It ain't possible to let you have excloosive grazing nowhere around here on account of the range already been took up so you better pull steaks yrs truly

Speshle Ranger Whaley.

Greatly cheered by his good fortune in finding Whalefoot McWhortle not at home, Whopper backed away, head cocked a little sideward, critically inspecting his correspondence.

He reached out a hand to the position where the faithful cheese-colored roan had stood over dropped reins. His touch contacted a warm, furry back, and he heard an ominous rumble unlike any sound his horse had ever made before.

He removed his gaze from the tent and turned. He was face to face with a long-snouted, hungry-looking bear. Its cavernous mouth was open, and its fangs were as long and sharp as icicles.

Whopper swallowed his chew again. With a hurried, appeasing caress his hand left the bear's hackled back. With a strangled yell he scooted around it and tore for the timber. He saw the cheese-colored roan had started already. What a famished spring bear might have felt justified in doing under such circumstances was not pleasant to surmise.

It was the molasses jug that saved Whopper. The bear made for it instead.

Whopper leaped for the running horse. His long bowed legs clamped around it like tongs. The reins fluttered loosely. Swap dived out and

captured them at the timber's edge. He brought the roan up rearing, and clung to the saddle like a grasshopper to a lettuce leaf. His face was the same color as his horse and his brow was damp with sweat.

"Th-this cussed hoss is shore skittery around b-bears!" Whopper managed to say.

Swap got his fore-and-aft hat set straight.

"Lucky one of yuh is intelligent," he said. "But that ain't the wust of it. Look, an' don't tell me yuh see what I see!"

He pointed. Whopper twisted around. The commotion had reached the ears of the last person in the Big Windies that either of them wanted to attract. Like a high-geared elephant, Whalefoot McWhortle was galloping across the meadow toward his camp, the look on his face boding good for neither man nor beast.

"What for did yuh stop me?" yelled Whopper. He grabbed the reins and sank steel into the roan's ribs. It bucked and whirled and streaked toward the high mountains. Swap had his saddle-bag. He cricketed onto the bay-sorrel and worked up a head of steam with his spurs.

McWhortle hit camp and the bear at the same time. His mighty foot almost telescoped it. With a pained roar the bear set out in the same direction as Swap and Whopper, but faster.

EVEN then further violence might have been averted. But on its departure, the bear snagged the handle of a darkish object in its greedy jaws. McWhortle recognized it as his cash jug.

With a roar louder than the bear's he dived into the tent and came out with his heavy artillery. He took a shot on the lope. It missed the bear and plowed sod along the pardners' line of flight. Both of them let out wails of protest.

Swap and Whopper had a fair lead. The bear was gaining, not because it had any sinister designs on them, but because the human war tank was out for the scalps of all three and wasn't waiting for any gray hairs to sprout on them.

The chase led up toward the naked peaks which echoed at regular intervals to the blast of McWhortle's great rifle. It was lucky for the bear that the sheepman wasn't a crack shot. Slugs mowed down young timber, broke boulders and defaced the scenery in general until the ammunition ran low. McWhortle swung the gun like a club and kept coming on like an avenging colossus.

He had an advantage in crossing snowdrifts. He had hoofed it after sheep all his life. And his broad-tread boots capered smoothly over the crust where the pardners' horses sank and stumbled.

The bear wasn't used to long distance jug-packing and he was getting winded. All at once he bolted from the trail and scurried up a lightning-killed tree, grunting and growling in annoyance.

Whalefoot McWhortle stopped under the tree and aimed. The bear was sitting on a bare limb, the jug raised to his mouth, his long, red tongue lapping eagerly at the slow, sticky flow.

Then McWhortle took stock. He had only two loads left. These he preferred to use on the fugitives ahead. So he cussed the bear, shook his fist and started again. The bear wouldn't get far. Not with Whalefoot McWhortle on his trail.

The delay gave the pardners a chance to change their tactics before they ran out of geography to retreat on. In a sheer wall, off to their left, was the dark opening of a cave. They made for it, and by standing in saddles managed to scramble up and squirm inside, like a pair of frightened rabbits.

CHAPTER IV

Dark Outlook

MCWHORTLE saw the riderless horses. He barged up the slope toward them. But the cheese-colored roan and the bay-sorrel outsmarted him. In a double end play they eluded the sheepman and hightailed back for the meadow.

Swap and Whopper, peering from the cave mouth, saw their enemy stand straddle-legged and indecisive. They could hear his hoarse, gusty cursing. They waited tensely for him to roam off so they could emerge and follow their horses and complete their escape.

Their fate hung in the balance while the slow-brained McWhortle pondered the situation, his fierce eye searching for sign. Unhappily for Swap and Whopper, he pounced on a tell-tale clue. It was Whopper's gnawed plugcut. It lay under the cave opening, where it had slipped from his hip pocket in the moment of his agile ascent.

His massive feet crunched loose rocks as he made for it and picked it up. His gaze traveled slowly upwards. The pardners ducked back into concealment. But at that hazardous instant their destiny took a vicious turn.

Swap, squatting low, sat on the sharp point of a spur. His first and immediate thought was that he had been fanged by a snake. He yipped and hopped and whacked at the seat of his pants. Too late he discovered his error. That unconscious sound of alarm betrayed him and Whopper.

"Holed up in there, are yuh?" howled Whalefoot McWhortle. "Well, yuh won't ever see sunshine agin, yuh gol-blamed weasels!"

He scanned the wall for foothold. Nothing offered, so he skirmished along the base of it until he found a stout piece of deadwood of sufficient length. He dragged it, hoisted one end and provided himself with a crude ladder. He clamped the rifle under one arm, rubbed his powerful hands together in savage anticipation and started up.

"I'll whack yore heads together till yore teeth rattle out!" he vowed. "Then I'll roll up the both o' yuh in one wad like a ball and singe yore pelts bald with gunfire!"

Whopper sent a jet of tobacco juice over a parapet of rock. Whalefoot McWhortle suddenly went blind in one eye. He didn't know what had happened until he swabbed at it with a fist. That was the last straw. He roared up the leaning log like a two-ton tornado.

Now he was in the cave, and the pardners were completely defenseless. There was not even a David-sized rock to hurl at their Goliath, girding himself for the slaughter.

Like frightened mice, Swap and Whopper slithered toward the rear of the cave. Darkness at least delayed their demise. The dark, and McWhortle's tobacco-sopped aiming eye. Two deafening thunderclaps sprayed the cave with lead. Then McWhortle was out of cartridges. With a torrent of blood-curdling language he roared after them.

AGAINST the irregular patch of daylight McWhortle's swelling biceps were outlined. His bellows-like chest wheezed like a locomotive's pop-off valve. He pushed up both his sleeves, and grabbed the heavy, octagonal barrel of his rifle like a bat.

Swap had squeezed into a crevice. But Whopper's long, angular dimensions handicapped him in any lizard-like effort. As his eyes grew accustomed to the underground gloom, McWhortle saw Whopper hopping like a kangaroo past him.

He bellowed and made a mighty swing. The gun stock whizzed, Whopper ducked. And McWhortle missed. The force of the blow spun him half

around. The old buffalo gun crashed against a knob of rock, splintered. With a mad howl McWhortle slammed down with what was left. Once more Whopper's frantic agility provided a hairbreadth escape. This time sparks showered, and the rifle barrel bent in the sheepman's hands. He hurled it from him with a devastating oath and pounced.

He didn't see the black crevice in time. He stamped down into it and his flatcar of a foot wedged there tightly.

Rocking and tugging, he strove to get free. Swap crept out of his narrow retreat and followed Whopper. They paused at the cave mouth. Whalefoot McWhortle was licked and he knew it. He blubbered pleas and promises, groaning for merciful rescue.

A strong man's collapse touched Swap's kind heart. The humbled giant deserved at least a word of consolation.

"We'll be back, Mister McWhortle!" he panted.

"B-but not right away!" added Whopper as he lowered himself outside. "Just take it easy, Mister McWhortle and remember that everything turns out for the best."

"We'll see that yore sheep is took care of," promised Swap. "Mebbe Mister Witherby will shoo 'em down to their home range for yuh."

McWhortle's begging entreaties chopped off short.

"Who?" he croaked hoarsely. "Witherby, did yuh say? Ike Witherby?"

"That's right," Swap assured him. "Me and my pardner are sort of bodyguards for Mister Witherby and his cows."

"Cows? *His* cows?" sputtered McWhortle. "Flickerin' brimstone, I'd give a lot tuh git my hands on Ike Witherby!"

Swap was always ready to listen to an attractive business proposition any day of the year.

"How much and what for?" he inquired enterprisingly.

"Yuh realize Ike Witherby is the biggest crook in the country? Him and his pard, that mealy-mouthed Habeas Corpus Jones are rustlers an' killers!" bawled McWhortle.

THIS was news. But Swap was shrewd enough not to show surprise. But Jones was wearing a forest ranger's uniform, which could only mean the real officer was dead or a prisoner somewhere.

"Reckon I might tell yuh right where tuh find 'em, Mister McWhortle," he dickered, his blood racing. "At bargain rates, too."

Whalefoot McWhortle eased down to a less painful position.

"First, git me loose."

The big man would be in a more generous frame of mind where he was, Swap wisely decided.

Whopper was safely out of the cave now. He bawled loudly from below:

"What's the palaver up there? Don't let that overgrowed sheepherder talk yuh into nuthin' foolish, pardner!"

McWhortle heard him.

"Don't leave me here thisaway!" he whimpered. "I'm already out two hundred dollars! Hold on! Find that jug o' money and it's yores, pervidin' yuh help me out o' this jackpot and turn me loose on Witherby and his slick pal!"

Two hundred was a nice, round sum for a day's work. With McWhortle's ire safely sidetracked onto the pair up at the cabin clearing, there was a gambling chance of finding it. Whereupon it would be honestly theirs.

"Tell yuh what, Mister McWhortle," Swap agreed. "Me and my pardner will look for that jug full o' cash. If we find it we'll come back and git yuh loose, even if we have tuh whittle yore leg off."

McWhortle moaned and sniffled. He was in no way anxious to lose a limb.

But a career of horse-trading had taught Swap when to be firm.

"I'm really offerin' yuh an easy deal, Mister McWhortle," he stated. "If I wanted tuh be hard on yuh, I'd say you ketch the bear and hand over the two hundred. Here you'll be restin' up in this cool, quiet cave whilst me and my pardner hunt up that bear and argue him out o' the jug. Besides which, mebbe by now the bear has swallowed all them pennies, dimes and quarters."

"If he did, I'll shake 'em out of him like a savin's bank!" McWhortle promised.

Swap looked outside. Whopper was legging after the horses. Swap yelled at him and sidled out of the cave to leaping distance of the ground below. He was deaf to McWhortle's sobbing protests. He yipped one last word:

"Keep cheerful, Mister McWhortle. Whatever happens, we won't let yuh die in there. Start countin' sheep and take yoreself a nap."

"I won't have no sheep tuh count," wailed the trapped giant, "if Witherby an' Habeas Corpus are on the loose in these here mountains!"

His blabbering faded as Swap ran after Whopper to acquaint him with the peculiar clauses of his verbal contract with Whalefoot McWhortle. Whopper heard him and paused to nibble at the piece of plugcut he had recovered.

CHAPTER V

The Money Tree

ONLY the most extraordinary incident could have persuaded Whopper Whaley to linger long in that vicinity. To catch up the horses and get out of the Big Windies was his greatest desire.

When they reached the lightning-killed pine they saw the bear still sucking at the molasses jug. By this time Swap had repeated his confab with Whalefoot McWhortle.

"That cussed bear ought to be full o' small change by now," commented Whopper, squinting up calculatingly. "About the most valuable bear, I'd say, in the whole country."

"When it decided tuh come down, mebbe it'll be easy tuh ketch," Swap suggested hopefully.

"Takes a long time for a bear tuh soak up a gallon o' slow molasses. In which time Mister McWhortle might contrive tuh git loose. It ain't worth waitin' for."

He started on. But Swap wasn't one to turn his back on a treeful of money.

"Wait a spell, Whopper!" he urged. "Now that this fake ranger job has blowed up in our face, we're just about destitute."

"I don't care a hoot. All I crave is tuh go tootin' away from here!" Whopper said.

"A handsome pair o' coffins, for instance, and nuthin' but ease from now on."

"Can't yuh ever see the bright side o' things?"

"Brightest thing I know of is not tuh tempt misfortune by foolin' around this bear-tree. Let's git!"

"We've always had purty good luck with bears."

"And mighty bad luck with sheep an' sheepherders! I'm askin' just once more. Are yuh comin' or do I hit out alone?"

When Whopper had his mind made up to travel nothing could stop him. He had proved that abruptly and unceremoniously. Swap had run out of argument. Reluctantly he started to follow. But just at that moment his alert, enterprising eye pounced on a bright and shining object lying at the base of the tree.

"Look, Whopper!" he shrilled, picking it up. He held it aloft. "Look, a quarter! A slick and clean two-bits!"

Whopper shifted his chew from one sunken, bristly cheek to the other. He

was almost out of plugcut. A quarter would buy a good-sized slab.

He drifted back. As he did so, something flashed in the air and clinked down on the rocky ground. He dived for it.

"A dime this time!" he cried wonderingly.

Swap stared upwards, round-eyed.

"Well, if this don't beat the tallest yarn you ever told!" he piped. "Yuh see what that bear's doin'? He's eatin' the molasses and spittin' out the seeds, like it was plums!"

"Mighty rich plums!" grinned Whopper.

He had forgotten his urge for haste. He had forgotten all about Witherby and Jones. He sat down, hugged his bony knees and cocked a vigilant eye at the bear.

A penny came next.

"Gosh, if that varmint's appetite for larrup just holds out!" breathed Whopper, pocketing the copper with his dime.

A few moments later there was a brief shower that totaled two dollars and fifteen cents.

"This is about the nicest work I know of, pickin' money up off the ground!" Whopper crowed jubilantly.

HE HAD his hat off now, capturing coins as they fell. He missed once and a half-dollar ricocheted off his baldish dome.

Their delightful diversion showed no sign of letting up so long as the bear nursed at the jug. As the day warmed the molasses flowed faster and the rate of profit increased for the pardners who playfully struggled for each donation.

The sun climbed to its zenith. Whopper's hat was full of money. There was more than a hundred dollars in it, he calculated. And their pockets bulged and clinked pleasantly.

All memory of their risky encounter with Whalefoot McWhortle and his uncomfortable proximity faded from their minds. But with the approach of mid-afternoon, a sharp and jarring reminder came.

Up the slope, spouting lusty oaths, the hulking sheepman appeared. He bore down on them like a thundercloud. It was too late to run.

"He's got sort of a rough way about him, Mister McWhortle has. But he's a man of his word, if I'm any judge o' character," Swap said with an effort at conviction.

But it was hard to judge McWhortle's character after he'd been penned up in a cave for long. He was minus a shoe and came at an awkward hobble. He grasped the twisted remainder of the big rifle. He brandished it as he neared them.

"Good I hung ontuh this!" he exploded. "Not much of a shootin' iron no more, but it'll do tuh wrap around yore miserable necks!"

The normal impulse was to run. But running with a hatful of money was awkward. Whopper backed warily around the tree.

"Don't go actin' rash, Mister McWhortle," Swap wheedled. "Me and my pardner was fixin' tuh go back and rescue yuh!"

"It ain't me that needs rescuin' now!" blasted the big man. "Here's where I beat the both o' you into a mush!"

He made a murderous swipe at Whopper who leaped like an antelope with coiled-spring legs. The gun walloped the bear-tree. It shuddered to its top.

"Don't yuh want tuh hear where them rustlers is at?" blatted Swap as dead bark dropped around him.

"One thing at a time is my motter!" shouted Whalefoot McWhortle. "Hold still!"

The impulse to light out was getting stronger. Swap and Whopper knew they could keep ahead of this persistent enemy, now that he was handicapped by the loss of a shoe. But

there was all that money. Whopper sashayed for it as McWhortle blitzed toward his little pardner.

McWhortle whirled and whanged at Whopper again. And now he saw Whopper's hat with its bright contents. He pounced on it. He squatted with a gurgle of delight.

Putting down his weapon, the sheepman raked his fingers in the cash, letting it dribble through his fingers as he drooled with miserly glee.

"What luck!" he babbled. "My grazin' money back!"

"It's ours now!" howled Swap. "Yuh promised—!"

McWhortle laughed rudely. He peeled off his own battered headgear and poured the money into it, then sent Whopper's hat whirling.

"Here's what I promise," he beamed wickedly. "I promise tuh let you and yore sidekick live if yuh clear out o' these mountains and don't ever come back! Now git started!"

A coin tinkled down. Whopper snatched at it. McWhortle pushed to his feet with a warning yell. He attacked again, swinging the bent gun with both powerful hands.

It would have mowed Whopper down like a scythe if it had connected. But the tree intervened. The smash almost uprooted it. Overhead, the bear gave a grunt of alarm and lowered the jug from its smeared muzzle, and grabbed for a steadying hold.

Whalefoot McWhortle lost all restraint at being cheated of vengeance. He hurled the gun at the dodging Whopper.

Again it hit the tree and bounced back, boomerang style. The heavy breech struck McWhortle's bootless foot. He gave a stricken screech and grabbed the injured member in both hands. He hopped around with sulphurous oaths, then sat down, nursing his bent toes in his lap.

"This settles it!" he bellowed. His moment of tender mercy had passed. "For this I keep after you pests till yuh're plumb eradicated! Ow! Just wait'll I git up."

CHAPTER VI

The Big Payoff

RISING clumsily, the big sheepman got a new hold on the bent blunderbuss bludgeon. His red beard seemed redder. He stood taller, and his vast shoulders swelled and widened.

"It ain't no use!" bleated Whopper. "C'mon, Swap! We better vamoose!"

"Yuh're right!" Swap cried in a broken, hopeless voice. "Mister McWhortle changes his mind too easy!"

"I ain't changin' my mind no more!" raged the sheepman, grinding his teeth and making a terrific rush for them.

At that precarious instant, the bear lost interest in the molasses jug. The contents were practically exhausted. He relaxed his hold on the jug and let it plummet down. The sheepman was directly beneath. The jug made a direct hit on Whalefoot McWhortle's round, hard skull.

McWhortle's head didn't burst into a thousand shattered fragments. But his cerebral processes did. And so did the jug. The few coins that clung inside of it flew in all directions. One sticky penny even stuck in McWhortle's whiskers.

Whalefoot McWhortle uttered a tired, gentle sigh. His massive legs wilted. He settled to the ground in a harmless heap.

Suddenly from the long meadow slope beyond came the rumbling thunder of hoofs. That sound was unmistakable. Cattle on the move! Swap and Whopper whirled, and saw four horsemen hazing a big bunch of beef toward a narrow draw two miles away.

Now, two of the riders veered away from the cattle and headed straight to-

ward the band of placidly grazing sheep near the pardners.

"Here they come!" gulped Swap, his eyes widening. "It's Witherby an' that feller Habeas Corpus Jones!"

"Yeah, an' they're headed this way to steal the woolies!"

The two horsemen rushed in behind the sheep, yelling shrilly. The flock, thrown into immediate panic, started to flee in wild rout, striking downslope straight toward the pardners.

"Hey! You can't take them sheep!" shrilled Whopper.

Suddenly the bleating woolies were rushing past them, down the long grade.

"Stop, thieves!" blared Swap.

Witherby and Jones spotted the two pardners. They swung their mounts in past the sheep and skidded to a halt close to the bear-tree. They didn't notice McWhortle lying yonder on the far side of the tree. Both men dismounted and there was menace in their flushed cheeks.

"Who's gonna stop us?" demanded Witherby in a voice that no longer held that high, piping note. His hand was resting on his gun.

Whopper's Adam's apple began to dance in his throat. Behind him the bear, evidently tiring of all the racket and disturbance, decided to abandon the tree. Like a furry, black ball he bounced to the ground. Swap and Whopper let out one yelp and ran. Unfortunately, the only direction they could run was toward the two rustlers.

THE bear let out a roar, angry at being disturbed, and raced for the nearest man. Witherby was right in line with the animal. His six-gun spouted wildly. He started to flee but the bear caught up with him. One huge paw crashed against Witherby's jaw, knocking him over backwards. He pitched to the ground, senseless, beneath the hooves of a few straggling woolies.

Roaring his defiance to the world, the bear churned up the slope, eager to get away from this spot. Swap and Whopper heard that bellow of rage. They visioned a hairy paw descending on their heads. They yelped in frenzy and plunged on—straight in the face of Jones' red-winking Colt.

"Whoa!" screamed Whopper.

That was all he had time for. Then, he and Swap were crashing into Jones. The gun flew out of the rustler's fingers, and the three men went threshing across the ground. Fists flailed, striking bone and flesh.

"I'm gonna kill you jiggers pronto!" raged Jones beneath the pile.

A winging fist knocked Whopper sprawling. He rolled on his stomach. He looked up, heard a wild yelling and saw Witherby's two riders dusting down the slope on their broncs. And over by the bear-tree there sounded a furious bellow. Whopper gulped. This was the end! McWhortle was up. He had the shattered remains of the blunderbuss in his fists. And he was charging up the slope.

Then Swap yelled as Jones got in a telling blow. Somehow Whopper's hand closed on a gun barrel. His eyes bugged wide. It was Jones' weapon. He grabbed it, rolled over and slugged Jones on the head, watching that individual cave.

"Steal my woolies, will you? I'll show you varmints—" McWhortle was fuming.

Whopper gave himself up, and lay sprawled on the ground. But the sheepman wasn't looking at him. He was lumbering past him through a wave of lashing gunfire that somehow missed him. Whopper saw him leap at one of Witherby's riders and club the man off his mount with a roundhouse swing of the blunderbuss. Then, he lunged toward the other rider. But that worthy, scared by that moving mountain of red beard and hoarse, unearthly cries issuing from the sheep-

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The big man held an ugly derringer

Klondike Gold

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

Author of "Calaboose Key," "Fence War," etc.

Tod Embry Follows a Trail of Gold and Vengeance When He Seeks a Back-Shooting Renegade!

FOR a moment the newcomer held back, watching the crowd of red-shirted miners as they bellied up to the bar and slapped their buckskin pokes on the counter. Some of the gold containers were long and slender with more room than dust in them. Others were as fat with nuggets as a well-filled shot bag.

The bartender held up his hand to

show that his fingernails were properly trimmed. Then he reached into the pokes and took a pinch of dust for each drink ordered. A huge giant of a man at one end of the bar seemed to be doing most of the buying. He tilted his poke, spilling gold dust and yellow nuggets across the polished mahogany.

"Drink up, everybody!" he roared. "Bully Bates is standin' treat." He turned toward the bartender. "Scratch that dust up, buzzard face, and yuh don't need to be too careful. Plenty more where that came from. Klondike's rich."

Shouting a loud assent, the miners lined up for the free drink. The bartender set out glasses. Opposite the newcomer he looked up.

"What's yore pleasure, stranger?"

The newcomer let a slow smile creep over his tanned face. Tall, with a lean, iron-muscled body that could become swift and lithe as a panther's when he sprang into action, Tod Embry looked oddly out of place in Dawson City. From the crown of his ten gallon Stetson to the high heels of his ornately-tooled, tight-fitting Justin boots, Tod had range country stamped all over him. His soft drawl bespoke Texas, and only half hid the steel in his voice, that same, hard steel that glinted at times from his clear, blue eyes.

HE SENSED the giant at the far end of the bar was watching him.

"Make mine a bottle," he said slowly. "A bottle of sarsp'rilla."

The miners laughed while the bartender looked at Bully Bates.

"And I'll pay for it myself," continued Tod evenly. He spun a silver cartwheel across the bar.

Bowling miners over like ninepins, Bates shoved his way up to the Texan.

"My friend," he said, throwing the crowd a broad wink, "mebbe where yuh come from they forgot to teach yuh manners. Right now I'm buyin' the house a drink. Yuh ordered a bottle. Fair enough. I'm a bottle man myself. But by grab, it's gonna be whiskey. And *yuh're* gonna drink it."

"I'd prefer sarsp'rilla," said Embry with deceptive meekness.

The bartender set out a full bottle of whiskey. Bates picked it up, pulled the cork with his teeth and reached for a chaser glass.

"You gonna drink it nice?" he coaxed, filling the glass with the fiery rotgut. "Or do I have to ram the bottle down yore throat?"

"Never touch the stuff," said Tod quietly. "Don't like the taste."

He was staring at the big man where his open shirt exposed a matted expanse of hairy chest. Suddenly Tod's face whitened. His eyes chilled to tempered steel as they fastened on a livid, crescent-shaped scar just above the big man's breastbone.

Bates put down the glass impatiently and advanced toward the Texan.

"Looks like yuh're gonna be bottle-fed, friend." He threw a broad grin back at the expectant crowd. "This is gonna hurt me more'n it will yuh, Mister—"

"Embry's the name," Tod informed him, his voice dangerously even. "From the San Saba down in Texas."

Bates' jaw sagged. "Embry!" he muttered hoarsely.

Animal fury flamed in his face. Then, without a word of warning, he swung his knotted fist at the Texan's head in a blow that would have felled an ox.

The crowd strained forward, certain they would see the Texan go slithering across the sawdust-covered floor. Instead, Tod dodged the punch, and its follow-through swung Bates in a half-circle. Tod, tense as spring steel, ploughed two fast ones into Bates' middle, aimed a third for the big man's jaw but merely grazed it. Then, Tod was weaving back away from Bates' cursing onrush.

His ducking, swaying body always

under perfect control, the sturdy Texan peppered hard, fast blows at his heavier opponent. Those that found their mark seemed merely to infuriate the giant. Bates crouched and bored in, trying for a bear-hug grasp that would crush the Texan's ribs.

A well-aimed blow with all Tod's strength behind it caught Bates on the chin. The big man staggered. When he came back killer hate burned in his beady eyes. His right hand plunged inside his shirt. It came up clutching an ugly, black-nosed derringer.

Tod ducked as lead burned past his shoulder. He lunged desperately for Bates' gun arm. A second bullet splintered through the bar. Suddenly the two battling men were thrust apart. Between them stood a hard-voiced Mountie, his immaculate scarlet tunic the symbol of law and order throughout the Northwest Territories.

"Break it, you two!"

Tom heard the crisp command delivered as coolly as if the clean-cut, square-shouldered law officer had just broken up a harmless scrap between a pair of fractious school kids.

"Bates," the Mountie snapped, pocketing the man's hideout gun, "lucky for you you're a bad shot. You know firearms aren't allowed in town. Get on back to your diggings. Any more trouble and I'll have you run clear out of the Klondike."

He watched the huge miner turn and walk out of the hushed saloon, muttering curses to himself. Then he swung toward Tod.

"Stranger," he said, "we don't like fist-fighting in Dawson City either. A man that can keep out of trouble stays here. A man that doesn't leaves quickly."

Tod grinned. "You fellows are about as good as the Texas Rangers. One to a riot. But thanks for buttin' in."

The Mountie smiled. "No hard feelings, lad. That was a ripping battle you put up." He offered his hand. "I'm Jim Shane, chief cook and bottle-washer on the law's side for the Klondike district."

Tod took the Mountie's hand in a firm grip, and introduced himself.

"Reckon then you're one of the men I came a long way to see. The other was that fellow Bates. I'm sure of it now."

The law officer caught the earnestness in Tod's manner. He glanced around at the miners, edging closer to hear what was going on.

"If it's business," said Shane, "let's talk it over in my office. It's just across the street. Meet me there in twenty minutes."

Embry nodded. When Shane left, he turned to the bartender. "Reckon I'll have that sarsp'rilla now," he drawled.

Nobody attempted to stop him this time. Nobody even smiled.

Later, in Jim Shane's log-cabin office, Tod did most of the talking. Corporal Shane sat back in the chair behind his desk and listened. When the Texan finished, the law officer tilted forward, scanned the few notes he had made, then spoke.

"Granted what you say is true, Embry, and your story sounds straight to me, it would be a law case up here. It would just be your word against Bates, and whatever witnesses he could dig up. Your word that over a year ago when the Miller Creek placers were first opened up Bates ran your dad off the Number-Two-above-discovery claim at gun-point. That he shot Tim Embry in the back, and left him for dead."

BRIEFLY the Mountie reviewed Tod's story of how his father had managed to crawl away with his life and make the long, arduous trek back to the States; of how Tod had come to the Klondike seeking justice and his father's share of the gold. It was money sorely needed to pay for the

expensive operations specialists said would be necessary to restore the eyesight the older man had lost through snow-blindness, suffered in fighting his way back to civilization.

"And you're sure Bates is the man?" the Mountie queried in conclusion. "His description fits that given you by your dad, and the scar you saw on his chest clinches it?"

"That's right," said Tod, his mouth firming. "If the law won't help me—"

Corporal Shane shook his head. "There are some places, perhaps, where a man can take the law into his own hands when it's necessary. But not here in Dawson City, Embry. It would only mean trouble for both of us."

"But Bates' claim!" expostulated Tod. "Dad staked it first. The records—"

"Bates would claim the ground was abandoned when he staked it." Shane reached into the desk drawer, pulled out a small, well-thumbed book. "Listen to this. I can't help it, but it's the law. 'A claim shall be deemed abandoned and open to occupation and reentry by any person when the same shall have remained unworked on working days for the space of seventy-two hours'."

Tod bit his lip. He could see how easy it would be, since that was the law, for a scoundrel like Bates to attack his father, then contend the claim had been abandoned when he re-staked it.

"Besides," went on Shane, "Bates has more than likely spent most of the gold he dug out of the claim. Recovery on that score would be almost impossible."

He paused a moment to watch the Texan's darkening face.

"Lad," he continued, "I know how you feel. But take a piece of sound advice. Forget the idea of personal revenge. Do something that will help your dad a lot more, and keep you out of trouble as well. The Klondike's rich. New gold claims are being discovered and staked every day. Go out and get yourself one. Winter's coming on now. You can't leave until the first boat gets up the Yukon next spring. At least, not unless you risk a terrible journey overland. Stick around and prospect. You ought to have money enough for your dad's operation and plenty over by spring."

It wasn't what Tod had intended. There was direct man-justice back home in the West. Not this tangled, red-tape law the Mountie was preaching, a law that hung on technicalities and brushed aside patent facts. Still there was logic in the red-coated law officer's suggestion. He could find a claim and dig the gold out of the ground himself. Everybody else seemed to be doing it. And the money for his dad's operation was, after all, the thing that was most important.

He forced a smile to his lips. "I'll try it your way."

"Thanks," said Shane. "And before you hit the diggings get rid of those high heels. Buy a pair of miner's rubber boots. You'll need 'em."

"I'll need a whole outfit," laughed Tod, making for the door.

"Don't forget a gold pan," the Mountie called after him as he left.

OUT at the diggings along the tributary creeks that emptied into the Klondike River, Tod found feverish activity. Miners were working fast, straining to put as much dirt through their rockers or sluice boxes as they could before the winter freeze set in and robbed them of their necessary flow of running water. El Dorado Creek was staked solid from its headwaters to its mouth. Tod moved on to Miller Creek. Conditions there were not much better.

Tod saw the hulking form of Bates, throwing great scoops of pay dirt into a sluice. His dad's pay dirt. For a moment his resolution was almost forgotten. Then he remembered. Besides,

trouble wouldn't restore his father's eyesight. Anxious to avoid a meeting with the big man, he made his way around a bend and proceeded toward the head of the creek where only a few men were working.

Because of this maneuver he didn't see Bates stop work and call a group of his neighbors to him. Nor did he hear the big man's rumbling words.

"'Nother chechako just came in," said Bates. "Them tenderfeet are gettin' thick as flies. Ain't no more room fer 'em. Miller Creek's too crowded."

The miners waited while Bully Bates slapped his thigh and laughed.

"Say, I got a good idea, boys." He jerked his head in the direction of a distant range of low-lying hills. "What say we tell him the creek is staked out, and send him packin' over to Pine Ridge? Ain't no gold there, but he don't know it."

Most of the prospectors, regarding it more in the light of a rough mine camp prank than anything else, agreed heartily.

"Yuh're a card, Bully," piped up a little prospector known as Shorty. "Sure, the trip won't do him no harm. And we'll be rid of him."

"All right, Shorty," said Bates. "Yuh tell him. That sarsp'rilla-drinkin' chechako and me ain't on good terms nohow.

The crowd laughed as Shorty hurried off on his mission.

"Make it sound good," Bates bellowed after him.

Shorty did. The short Yukon day was drawing to a close when Tod reached the ridge, and followed an alder-filled gulch that Shorty had described toward the summit of the hill. To his surprise he smelled wood smoke. A sharp turn in the gulch brought him almost face to face with a prospector's tent, its outside walls banked to the eaves with heavy sod. A curl of blue smoke rose lazily from the stove-pipe protruding from the canvas roof. Disappointment crossed Tod's face. Shorty had assured him this was virgin territory.

"Hello, inside," he called, then stepped back startled as the tent flap opened and the prettiest golden-haired girl Tod had ever seen emerged. Dressed in boots and trim khaki breeches, her brightly colored plaid wool shirt was open at the throat.

"Howdy. Light and stay awhile," the girl said. Her silvery drawl was unmistakably Southern. "Pot likker is simmering on the stove, and the biscuits are almost ready." She held up a pair of flour-whitened hands.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Tod.

At the girl's invitation he sat down on a broad, rough hewn half-log bench in front of the tent. He was glad to be relieved of the burden of the heavy pack he had been carrying most of the day.

"Be back in a minute," said the girl. "Haven't seen a stranger here in a 'coon's age."

When she returned her hands were free of flour. Tod noticed she had tidied up her hair.

"I'm Sally Mae Dee," she announced. "From Paris, Tennessee. My brother's inside keeping warm by the stove. He's been freezing to death ever since he struck the Klondike."

Tod introduced himself.

"From Texas!" exclaimed Sally. "That makes us practically neighbors."

WATCHING her, Tod wondered what the pair were doing here on Pine Ridge. At the supper table, after he had met her brother, Mark, he found out. He understood then the strain that her smile only partially hid and the worry that lurked in the depths of her sparkling eyes.

Mark, thin and lightly built, didn't have much to say during the meal. He seemed beaten, discouraged. He looked to Tod as if he lacked the physical strength necessary to make a success of placer mining with its

hard grind of pick and shovel labor. Tod's guess was right.

"Mark just isn't meant for this country," explained the girl. "Of course, if we hadn't been fooled by those miners on Miller Creek into coming here, things might have been different."

Fooled! Tod was interested.

"What do you mean, ma'am?" he asked quickly.

"There's no gold here. Only a few colors. A man named Bates told us the ridge would be rich to get rid of us. At least on Miller Creek we could have dug out enough gold to get back to the States."

"We're licked. That's what," cut in Mark Dee bitterly. "Broke and our grub almost gone. We believed Bates and spent our money here searching for gold that don't exist."

Anger crawled through Tod. Apparently he'd been a sucker, too.

"I came up to prospect myself," he said quietly.

"Did you?" Tod felt the sudden hope in the girl's voice. "Maybe you know better where to look than we did. If you wait till morning I'll show you where Mark and I have been digging. It's on the other side of the gulch. We couldn't go very deep because the ground is permanently frozen beneath the surface. Even a pick won't make an impression on it."

"Yeah," cut in Mark, "we tried to get down to bedrock. The miners told us that's where the richest gold was always found. Guess they knew we couldn't dig through solid ice."

Tod read the expectancy in Sally's eyes. "I'll look the ground over in the morning," he said hollowly.

Yet, even as he said it Tod was sorry for the false hope he had raised. He was as green at prospecting as the Dees. Probably greener.

He had that and a lot of other things to think about before he dropped off to sleep that night wrapped in his own blankets on the hard bench outside the tent. It was a cold night, clear and star-filled, but with the first real bite of the approaching Arctic winter in it. About two in the morning, Tod woke up, shivering. For greater privacy he had moved the bench some distance away from the tent near a grove of aspens.

There was plenty of dry wood nearby so he built himself a fire. He was still hunkered over its comforting warmth when the first rays of a pale sun sprayed dawn across the frosty earth. Already smoke was coming from the tent stove-pipe and he smelled coffee.

Sally came to the doorway.

"Breakfast's ready!" she called. "You can wash down at the creek, Tod."

She'd called him Tod. He liked that. It sent pleasant little shivers he'd never felt before racing up his spine. He washed at the creek, but he wasn't smiling as he made his way with towel and soap back to the bench. He was wondering how he'd tell Sally he wasn't a real prospector, just another dumb chechako that had been taken in by the miners on Miller Creek.

ONLY he wasn't going to let Bates get away with it. Jim Shane and all the Mounties in Canada weren't going to stop him from playing it his way this time. He didn't care what happened afterward. Angrily he kicked at the ground near the embers of his fire. To his surprise, his booted foot slipped, almost sent him sprawling against the bench. Regaining his balance he stared at his foot. The next instant he was shouting toward the tent.

"Sally! Mark! Come here! Look!"

The pair rushed out.

"What's the matter? What is it?" asked Sally, catching the fever of his excitement.

"Mud!" exclaimed Tod triumphantly pointing at his boot.

Mark Dee turned back to the tent.

"Is that all?" he said disgustedly. "Gosh, I thought you found gold."

"Maybe we have." Tod faced Sally. She looked puzzled. "We can dig mud," he explained. "I figure that by building a big fire over that frozen prospect hole of yours at night, we can take out the dirt it thaws each day."

"And keep sinking the hole down until we reach bedrock," Sally finished for him. "Tod, you're—you're wonderful."

After breakfast even Mark became enthusiastic.

"If Tod'll help me cut some of the wood," he said, "I'll keep the fire going nights. At least, that job ought to be warm enough for me."

Tod laughed. "We'll all pitch in." Sally nodded her assent.

Nevertheless, it was slow work. Tod dug. The prospect shaft sank a little deeper every twenty-four hours. When it was no longer possible for Tod to shovel the thawed dirt to the surface, Mark or Sally or both of them together hauled it to the surface in a bucket attached to a long rope.

At twenty feet bedrock was struck. As the layer of gravel just above it came into view Tod could see the specks of yellow gold glistening in the dirt. A heavy nugget slid out of the wet, sticky mass on his shovel and landed at his feet. He picked it up with a shout.

"Gold!" he called. "We've got it this time."

Sally leaned over the shaft. "Really?" she questioned. "Let's see."

Tod wiped the nugget clean on the seat of his pants and tossed it up to her.

"Here, have a hundred dollars," he joked.

He stooped to hunt for another lump of the precious gold, and straightened swiftly at the sound of a voice he would have recognized anywhere.

"Gold, eh!" gritted the rasping tones of Bully Bates. "Hand it over, girl, and let's see if it's genu-ine."

"I won't. It's mine." Tod heard Sally's defiant reply.

Then came the swift sound of an open palm swung hard against tender flesh as Sally's scream sent the blood burning in his veins. Where was Mark? Then Tod remembered Mark had been up the night before watching the thaw-fire, and was sleeping in the tent across the gulch. Sally was up there alone. He could hear her struggling with Bully Bates.

The ladder Tod had built for use in getting into and out of the shaft wasn't very strong, but he scaled it now two rungs at a time. As his head and shoulder cleared the top, Bully Bates released his hold on Sally's wrists and swung a vicious foot at the ladder.

His boot missed Tod's head by less than an inch, and sent the ladder hurtling to the far side of the shaft. But Tod was already on the ground, scrambling to his feet before another kick leveled at his head could drop him stunned to the bottom of the shaft.

"You, too!" roared Bates, backing a step in preparation for a new onrush. "By grab, old Tim Embry found one good claim fer me. Now his younker's got me another."

TOD had no time for words. He took a step forward, drove his right to the big man's chin. Bates pulled his head back, away from the blow.

"Thought I'd mosey over and see how you and the Dees was doin' since yuh was still on the ridge," grated Bates. "Lucky fer me I did. Miller Creek's about worked out."

He rushed, his evident intention being to grapple with Tod, and throw his broken body down the prospect pit to smash on the hard bedrock far below. Tod ducked low to avoid the charge, then leaped sideward. Bates' momentum carried him to the shaft

edge, and almost into the pit. But he managed to halt his progress in the mud around the shaft collar, though he slipped heavily to the ground.

Rage-blinded, Bates pulled himself upright. Tod waited a split-second, every muscle and nerve spring-taut. It must be now or never, he told himself as he saw Bates' hamlike arms come up half-bent, his fingers crooked for a death grasp. The big man's shoulders hunched forward in the first sign of a charge. Tod dived. His shoulder slammed at Bates' shins. The impact of the unexpected blow sent the giant sprawling on his face.

Tod, too, was down. But he was up first and astride the big man's back, his strong legs clamping hard against the fellow's loins. He twined his hands in Bates' shaggy hair, twisting it sharply while Bates screamed in mortal pain, then banged the big head up and down against the earth. The sharp gravel cut and sliced at the giant's face, shredding bloated cheeks until they were sieved with streams of blood.

BLOOD got in Bates' eyes. Some of it reached his rock-battered mouth. The sickening taste brought out all the cowardly nature in Bates' huge hulk. The big man started whimpering, crying for the mercy he never would have shown another.

Almost in disgust, Tod let the whining giant's head drop. He heard movement, voices behind him. Mark's and Sally's and another he hadn't heard since he left Dawson City.

"I'd let him up, lad," said Corporal Shane. "His kind can't take it. They can only dish it out when the odds are in their favor."

Tod didn't realize until he staggered to his feet how weak he was. His eyes sought Sally.

"Did that fellow hurt you?" he demanded.

Sally smiled, and shook her head. "Not as much as you did him." She held up the yellow nugget. "And he didn't get the gold."

The Mountie motioned Mark to help him while he rolled Bates over. Then he bent down and snapped a pair of handcuffs on the giant.

"You were right, Embry," he murmured. "I've been checking your story and the records since you left. I've got enough on Bates to keep him safely tucked in jail for years. I went to Miller Creek after him, but he'd left so I trailed him here."

He peered down the shaft. "I see you've been thawing holes like a regular old sourdough. What luck did you have?"

"Good," said Tod. "Bonanza gold on bedrock. But it's not my claim. It belongs to—"

"All of us," cut in Sally.

Corporal Shane scratched his chin and grinned. "You folks plan to sell out, or work it yourselves?" He prodded Bates to his feet.

"We haven't decided yet," answered Sally, stealing a glance at Tod under her long lashes. "But I know what I'm doing to do with my share. Buy a ranch in Texas. Down in the San Saba country."

"Gee, Sis," broke in Mark. "I'm with you, but I didn't know you were interested in cattle."

"If you mean it, ma'am." Tod felt the color rising in his face. The rest of his words spilled out awkwardly. "I'd be mighty glad to help you find that ranch if I could."

"I'm sure you could, Tod," said Sally softly.

Corporal Shane was still smiling to himself when he herded his prisoner back towards Dawson City. Mark wondered why. But then Sally's brother was a lot younger than the Mountie. And besides, he hadn't been around as much.

Next Issue's Novel : TRAIL OF IRON MEN, *by* Bradford Scott

STRAIGHT AND NARROW

By PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

Author of "West of the Wolverine," "Man Hater," etc.

The stranger's right to the chin sent the big man backward

THE boy was outmatched. The stranger saw that at once. He was game enough, and light on his feet, but when his snarling, solid beast of an opponent landed, it was with the impact of a cannonball. He was landing more often now, and the kid was being battered down.

Lonnie Kent Was Headed for the Owlhoot Trail—Till a Mysterious Stranger Showed Him a Better Road!

It was just another barroom brawl, and the stranger knew no more how it had started than he knew the fighters themselves. But the gallant stand of the boy warmed him, drew him. In his younger days, he himself had been just such a fighting rooster.

The boy kept boring in, refusing to give ground, instinctively holding his guard high to protect his face from those sledgelike blows. His opponent was forty pounds heavier, with a torso like a whiskey barrel and a growth of stubble on his face thick enough to turn a rock. His set grin was a malicious one.

It was evident that he was getting keen enjoyment from the punishment he was inflicting.

The end came at last. A quick feint at the jaw drew the guard still higher, then a pistonlike blow beneath the belt doubled the boy, forcing a gasp of agony from him. Face unprotected, he leaned against the bar, both hands pressed against his abdomen. And while he stood defenseless the big man closed and swung.

The stranger was out of his chair before the boy hit the floor.

"Let's see if you can do that to me," he challenged.

The answer came in a powerful swing that would have felled a beef had it landed, but the stranger had read the intention in the beady, bloodshot eyes, and an arm just as massive and just as powerful turned the blow. Then a fist like concrete caught the fellow squarely in the mouth and jolted him to the soles of his feet.

After that it was a bit pitiful, for that one crushing blow sapped the bully's strength. He covered up, trying to keep away until he could rally his resources, but the stranger had no mercy. He went after the fellow like a tiger, driving blow after blow into face and midsection and over the heart until his opponent was gasping with agony, eyes wide, mouth open.

A rib-crushing left to the body, followed by a right to the chin, sent the big man backward. He tripped over his spurs and sat down with a force that jarred the saloon. But not even that powerful punch could rob him of consciousness, and as he hit, his hand swept toward his gun. The stranger leaped forward, lashed out with a foot, and the weapon went flying.

"Get up and get out," ordered the stranger. The other rose slowly to his feet and staggered from the place, muttering.

THE stranger helped the boy to his feet and led him through the back doorway to the dark alley. There he groped his way to a watering trough and sat on its edge to get back his strength and wind. Presently he spoke.

"You shore gave Tug Bodine his needin's. I'm obliged to you, Mister."

"Call me Joe."

"Shore. I'm Lon Kent."

There was a moment of silence. The boy peered through the darkness at the man, but the gloom hid Joe's features. All he could discern was a vague shape which towered strong over him.

"You—live around here?" presently asked Joe.

"Yes. Ma and me run a small cow spread. It's tough goin', and Tug Bodine makes it tougher. Ma's a widow and used to call Tug friend. We borrowed money from him. Then he got to pesterin' Ma to marry him, usin' that loan as a lever.

"Tonight he told me he was goin' to call it unless she sees things his way. Claims he needs the money, but he was lyin'. Why just this evenin' down at the stage station he gave the agent—" He broke off suddenly.

"I don't know why I'm spillin' over like this to a stranger; but you saw him—you sized him up. Would you stand by and watch him force yore mother to marry him?"

Joe's voice was harsh.

"Not in ten million years!"

"Shore you wouldn't. Neither will

I." He got to his feet. "I'll fix that jigger right where he lives."

"This Bodine is a dirty fighter," said Joe tightly. "I don't reckon you'd stand much chance with him. You better watch yore step."

"Oh, I'm not goin' after him with a gun. I'll get him in my own way. Thanks again, Joe. Mebbe I'll be seein' you."

He walked away, and the man called Joe rolled a cigarette and sat down to smoke it. After awhile he got up and made his way to the street. Treading like a wary cougar, he made a circuit of the town. Bodine would plug him on sight, and Joe was too much of an oldtimer to give him the chance. He investigated each store and saloon from the shadows outside, finally locating Bodine in a joint at the far end of town. Lon Kent he did not see at all.

As he passed the stage station, he examined the little building with expert eyes. That unfinished statement of Kent's had been significant. He had spoken of Tug Bodine's wealth and in the next breath had said that Bodine had given the stage agent—what? Money, of course. Gold or specie for shipment.

Going to the hotel, Joe got his blanket roll and explained tersely to the clerk.

"I'm hittin' the trail. Nice night for travelin', and my hoss is rested."

He rode eastward for an hour, then left the road and circled back across the range. Striking a creek, he followed it to a point opposite the town. Here he dismounted and tied and squatted on his heels in the shadow of some cottonwoods to smoke.

One by one the dim lights of the town blinked into nothingness. When the last gleaming dot was extinguished he got up, mounted and rode to the stage corral. Here he once more tied his horse, then removed his spurs and circled the inclosure to the big front gate.

There was no sound save an occasional movement from the animals in the corral, and he continued to the back of the station itself. His gaze went at once to the one rear window. This would probably afford the best means of entrance, but on a hunch he tried the door. To his surprise he found it unlocked.

CAUTIOUSLY he opened it an inch or so, and his exploring fingers found the splintered edge which told him it had been forced. Standing behind the frame, he pushed it with his foot until the space was sufficient to admit him. Like a shadow he slipped inside, and now he gripped the .44 Colt in his hand.

For a moment he stood listening, then very softly moved the door to its original position. To his straining ears now came the sound of grating metal. A muttered exclamation of impatience reached him. By the faint starlight which filtered through the front window he saw a vague form kneeling before a dark object which he knew must be the safe.

Step by cautious step he moved forward, his Colt pointed at the figure on the floor. So intent was the other on his task that Joe was able to steal to a point directly behind him without being detected. Again came the exasperated exclamation. Then, as though startled by the sound of his own voice, the would-be thief flashed a look over his shoulder and froze at sight of the form which stood there. "Combination a bit tough?" grimly whispered Joe.

The figure came up like a released spring, a fist coming up with it; but Joe parried the blow with a sweep of his left arm and in the next instant had circled the man's shoulders and thrust the muzzle of his Colt into the other's midsection.

"Easy, Lon. It's only me—Joe."

"Joe!" panted the boy. "What are you doin' here?"

"You as much as told me back there at the saloon that Bodine had left

money here. But I'da had that safe open long ago. You'd make a pore thief, Lon."

"You can open it? Then get to work, Joe, and we'll split."

"No, we won't. We're gettin' out of here as fast as we can. There's been too much noise already, and this man's town has a night marshal."

Joe had released his hold, and his Colt was hanging muzzle down.

Kent protested.

"We've come this far, might as well finish it. I need that money, Joe—need it bad. Don't you see? Five thousand will put Ma in the clear with Bodine, and she can send him packin'."

"I tell you we're gettin' out of here while we can." Joe gripped the boy by an arm and pushed him toward the door. Lon would have resisted, but at that moment they heard the scrape of a spur on the plank sidewalk. Instantly they glided to the back door, slipped out into the starlight.

"Where's yore hoss?" whispered Joe.

"West side of the corral."

"Get him and ride north. Meet me at the creek. Hurry!"

BY THE time Lon had joined him, lights were blazing in the stage station. They rode across the range and over a hogback which would hide them from view of possible searchers, then swung west until they struck the hills. Here Joe drew rein and swung from his horse.

"Reckon we're safe enough. 'Light and tell me about it."

They squatted side by side and smoked while they talked.

"Tug has a share in a minin' claim, and his partner pays him off in gold every six months," explained Kent. "Last evenin' I was sittin' under an open window at the station and heard Tug tell the agent he was shippin' five thousand dollars to the bank at Mustang. Right then it struck me that if I could get my hands on that money, Ma could pay Bodine off."

"With his own money," said Joe. "I can understand that, after what he did to you. But suppose you had got it. Tug knows yore mother is broke, and when she pays him off, he'd savvy who stole his gold. And yore mother—reckon she'd wonder where you got it, and when the news of the robbery reached her, she'd know too. Likely she'd refuse to use it, and you'd be ridin' the owlhoot trail without payin' off the debt after all."

"I ain't as dumb as all that, Joe. You see, I got me a little claim back here in the hills. Staked it hopin' to dig enough gold to square up with Bodine, but there ain't enough color to make it worth while workin'. I aimed to salt that stolen gold in my own claim and take it out a bit at a time. That way Ma or Bodine or nobody else would ever suspect that I stole it."

"Reckon you have it figgered pretty slick at that, Lon," said Joe after a moment's silence. "So we'll have to tackle the thing from another angle. No matter how slick you do it, no matter how many people you fool, you cain't fool yore own conscience. You'd still be a thief in yore own eyes."

Lon laughed shortly. "I could stand it—seein' it was Bodine's."

"You could stand it, yeah. But that ain't the point. Once you got started in that stealin' game, you'd find it hard to quit. That first theft was so easy that before you realized it you'd be lookin' for another chance. First thing you know, you'd be stealin' again. And sooner or later you'd get caught. Then what?"

"I don't reckon I'd try it again. But suppose I did? There's a heap of men gettin' away with it. All a fella's got to do is be careful and plan ahead. Look at that outlaw they call Nevada Joe. He—" Lon broke off, and his companion knew that he was peering eagerly through the darkness at him.

"Sa-a-ay! Yore name's Joe and you were after that gold! I know now who you are! *You're Nevada Joe!*"

(Turn to page 100)

A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND STILL LIVING!

A strange method of mind and body control that often leads to immense powers never before experienced is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country rarely visited by outsiders and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth and the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep by the suggestions of associates, by what we read and by various experiences.

To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

Our accepted ideas of old age and death, he claims, would prove utterly wrong if we could escape from their hypnotizing influence. He points to the exotic Joshua Trees of the California Desert, many of which are over a thousand years old and still living. Some are thought to be two and three thousand years old. Life and youth, he says, can persist several times longer than people think. In Tibet this is believed and certain methods, based on this belief, are employed. Incredible ages are often ascribed to sages there. "The methods are too new in the Western World," he says, "for us to have authoritative data. But they may be instrumental, meantime, in prolonging our youth and increasing our mental, physical and spiritual powers."

"The time has come," he declares, "for every enlightened man and woman to achieve the greater health, success and happiness possible through this ancient but remarkable method of mastery." His amazing 9,000 word treatise is now being offered by The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 96-L, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers of this paper who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write promptly for the free treatise.

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The man said nothing. Lon went on, his voice trembling with excitement.

"Shore you are! Nevada Joe, the king of 'em all! By jacks, what luck for me! Joe, take me in with you. I know I ain't much of a hand at the game, but I'll learn. We'll clean up. We'll—"

"Stop it!" Nevada Joe's voice was harsh. "You're loco. You don't begin to know what you're talkin' about. Suppose I am Nevada Joe—you reckon I'd take a good clean kid like you in with me? Forget it. Go back to that ranch with yore ma and be a man."

"How could I be a better man than by throwin' in with you ? I tell you I know all about you. Stickin' up banks and stages and trains single-handed—fightin' off posses—outwittin' them all! And you tell me to go back and nurse cows and be a man!"

Nevada Joe spoke almost savagely.

"That's what I said. Nevada Joe is no man—he's a coward of the lowest kind. He's a coward because he didn't have guts enough to stick to the straight and narrow way that real men walk. He's a coward because after he first strayed from that path he didn't have the guts to take his medicine and start fresh.

"He's a coward because in all these holdups you holler about he was sure to get the drop on the other man before he could do anything about it. I tell you, this Nevada Joe is the meanest, most cowardly animal that ever walked God's green earth!"

Lon laughed shortly, disbelievingly.

"You're tryin' to talk me out of it, but I don't listen good. Trouble is you think I ain't got it in me to ride the owlhoot trail beside you. Well, I aim to show you."

THERE was a period of silence. Lon crushed out his cigarette and nervously started to roll another. When finally Nevada Joe spoke, it was in a voice surcharged with suppressed passion.

"The owlhoot trail! Reckon it does touch the imagination of young fellers like you. And you won't let us old-timers who've traveled it strip away the glitterin' veil and show you the ugly things behind. But I want you to remember my words, Lonny boy, even if you don't heed them. I want you to keep them always with you, and when the time comes that you get just a glimmerin' of the truth, I want you to rein to the right then and there and get back on the straight and narrow trail yore mother must have told you about.

"This here Nevada Joe—he's the most unhappy man alive. You got friends. There ain't a place on the face of the globe that you cain't tread as the equal of any man. There ain't a person that you cain't look in the eyes with the knowledge that you're as good as he is. The companionship of decent women is open to you. If you're sick or hurt you have the right to call on others to help you.

"Nevada Joe is a lone wolf—despised, feared, hunted. He has to be on guard twenty-four hours of the day, hidin' away from other men, suspicious of every person he meets, never knowin' when the hand of the law is goin' to fall on his shoulder or pump hot lead through his vitals. He has no friends because he can trust no man. In his heart he knows that he ain't deservin' of the friendship of a good woman, even if he were able to win it.

"There are days when he's starvin', other days when he must crawl in a den somewhere and lick his wounds because he cain't take the chance of puttin' himself in the hands of a doctor. But the big thing is the awful loneliness. He's walled in by a barrier of his own buildin'—a barrier which separates him from his fellowman as shorely as though he was on a continent by himself."

"He can live with other men if he's slick enough not to get caught," asserted the boy confidently. "It's just after he's found out that things get tough."

"If he's just a step above the dumb brutes, he has a conscience, and he can never quite numb it, Lonny. Reckon it would be sort of hard for you to look that ma of yores in the eyes knowin' that she believed in you, and that you weren't worthy."

"Stealin' that gold from Tug Bodine wouldn't worry me," said the boy defiantly. "I could still look her in the eyes and feel pretty good about it."

Nevada Joe sighed.

"I see I cain't convince you. But just remember what I told you. When the first glimmer of truth strikes you, turn back. Turn back before it's too late."

"I'll remember. Well, reckon we better be amblin' over to my claim. It's only a few miles away. I told Ma I was goin' to try it once more. You can bunk with me, Joe."

"Reckon not. You see, they'll know that somebody broke into the stage station, and if they heard us scufflin' they'll be lookin' for two. Alone, you're safe enough. With a stranger, they'd be apt to be suspicious. No, I'll bunk outdoors somewhere."

"Then promise me somethin'. Promise you'll hang around until this time tomorrow night. Meet me here then."

JOE promised. He had no intention of letting this young man get away from him while temptation still remained. Lon Kent, he felt sure, had not given up the idea of stealing from Tug Bodine, and with the stage company forewarned, any attempt now would be extremely hazardous.

So, when Lon mounted and rode into the hills, Joe was not very far behind him. He halted when the boy did, and presently saw a faint light through the window of a shack near a mine shaft. When he considered it safe to do so, Joe crept close enough to peer through the grimy panes. Lon was engaged in tearing a blanket into strips about six inches wide. When the task was finished, the boy extinguished the light and stretched out on the bunk, and Joe stole back to his watching place, not a little puzzled by the boy's strange action.

He loosened the cinch on his saddle, then seated himself on the ground with his back to a rock. The hours passed but he did not sleep. Alone with his thoughts he sat there, and often those thoughts were on the boy who would follow in his footsteps. Somehow, he must be saved from the consequences of his determination, and it was up to Joe to kill his desire to be a bandit.

The first signs of dawn were in the sky when Joe stiffened, rubbing the end of his cigarette against a stone. A vague figure had come from the shack, a figure which in the dim light did not resemble that of Lon Kent at all. The boy was slim. This person was broad, pounds heavier, built more like himself.

And suddenly Joe knew why that blanket had been torn into strips, and a grim smile came to his lips as he remembered Kent's statement that a man would not be caught if he planned ahead and was careful. As soon as Lon had caught up and mounted his horse, Joe prepared to follow. And when the boy left the mine, Nevada Joe was trailing him.

He did not head for town, but cut across the rolling range in a direction which would bring him to the stage road at a point some five miles east of the village. And presently Joe knew the answer to this, also.

He dared not get too close to Lon lest the boy see him or hear the thud of pursuing hoofbeats. When Kent struck a timbered ridge and entered the woods Joe was forced to drop back even farther. He could not see the boy now and had to stop often to locate him by the sounds of his progress. It was during one of these halts that he heard that which explained Lon Kent's whole errand. From the direction of the road to his right came the jingle of harness and the rattle of wheels. It was the early morning stage

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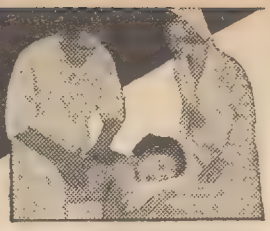

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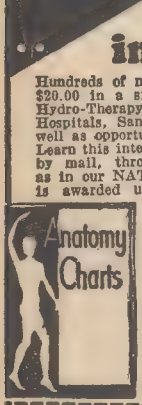

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and on it, in all probability, was Tug Bodine's gold.

Joe knew now why Lon had made him promise to meet him the following night. The boy planned to hold up the stage and show him the gold as evidence of his ability to work as a partner to the famous outlaw.

Joe reined in to listen and presently knew that Lon had now cut to the right, heading directly for the road. Time was terribly important now. Should he follow the course set by Kent or chance a shortcut? Joe decided on the latter, striking in a straight line for the point in the road which the boy was evidently endeavoring to reach.

He lost all the time he might have gained by running into a steep-banked ravine where he was forced to hunt for a full ten minutes before finding a place where he could cross. Once over, he pushed his horse as rapidly as the underbrush would permit, knowing that he was losing ground at every jump.

THE sound of a shot reached him, muffled by distance. He was too late! Tight-lipped and grim he forged ahead, and after agonizing minutes heard a second report. The sound was close now. Joe halted his horse, dismounted and hurried forward on foot.

Through the brush, he glimpsed two pairs of upraised hands, then, as he cautiously advanced, the bodies of stage driver and guard and the top of the vehicle. The road here ran through a cut in the hills, and it was the edge of this defile upon which Joe found himself. He dropped to all fours and crept silently to a bush through which he could view the scene.

On the ground, in a position where he could watch driver and guard, crouched the blanket-padded Lon Kent. His hat was drawn low, and a bandanna handkerchief concealed his face beneath the eyes. Unless one knew of the padding, he would never associate the bandit with Kent. In

appearance he more resembled Nevada Joe. He had shot away the lock on the strong box and was transferring buckskin pokes of gold to a gunny-sack with his left hand while he kept the two on the stage covered with the gun in his right.

A distant sound stiffened all of them. It was the rapid roll of hoofs coming from the direction of town. Lon snapped to his feet, listening; both guard and driver turned their heads. Nevada Joe swore under his breath. The kid should have known that the stage would be trailed after the attempt to rob the station. The guards had not anticipated a holdup so close to town and had left several minutes after the coach, intending to overtake it before it had gone very far. And now Lon was indeed in danger.

The boy knelt again and hurriedly transferred the rest of the gold. Then, gun in hand, he backed to his horse, swung into the saddle and spurred for the timber at the end of the cut. Instantly Nevada Joe backed away, got to his feet and ran to his pony. Tearing loose the reins, he leaped upon the animal's back and started after Lon.

Presently he was forced to stop in order to determine the direction of Lon's flight, and when he did so he heard the voices of the posse as they questioned driver and guard. The sound of pursuing hoofbeats was in his ears when he once more spurred after Kent. They would overtake the boy surely, he told himself, and there didn't seem to be any way in which he could help Lon. Resistance would be useless, and capture meant disgrace for the boy and a broken heart for his mother.

Joe rode now as he had seldom ridden before, and the horse beneath him seemed to sense the need of desperate haste. He leaped fallen trees in stride, forged bravely through thick clumps of brush, slid into gullies and then scrambled out of them. Overhead, branches snatched at the rider, sweep-

[*Turn page*]

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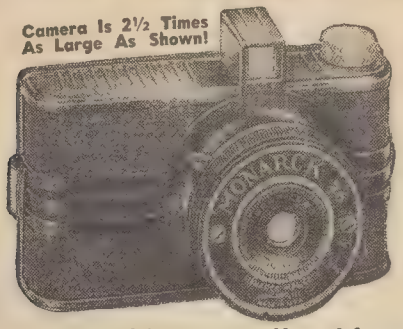

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ing off his hat, leaving their marks on his set face. But the signs of Lon's progress were before him, and he did not slacken the pace.

His horse jerked to a stop on the brink of a ravine, but Joe relentlessly spurred him down the steep bank. Lon had gone before him, and where Lon had gone he could follow. Into the brush-choked bottom they crashed, the pony breasting the thicket in mighty lunges, head held high. The sky was getting lighter, but down here the gloom was still deep. Ahead of Joe a vague shape was angling gallantly up the steep side of the ravine, and as he drew nearer Joe made out the figures of Lon and his horse.

THE animal had nearly reached the top when it faltered, slipped and started sliding backwards. Lon dropped to the ground, scrambled desperately for the top, still clinging to the reins. But the horse turned sideways, fell and dragged the boy with him. Over and over they rolled, clear to the bottom. The horse lay still where its body came to rest, but Lon was on his feet instantly, and as Joe dropped to the ground the boy's six-gun came out and up.

"Easy, Lon," said Nevada Joe. "It's me."

Kent gasped his relief.

"You shore gave me a fright! I was makin' so much noise that I didn't hear you. What's that?"

The crashing of brush had caught his attention.

"Stage guards. Reckon you're trapped, son."

Lon exclaimed sharply and ran to his dead horse. Lifting the gunny-sack from the saddle, he swung it over his shoulder and started for the side of the ravine.

"Better get goin'!" he shouted over his shoulder. "If they catch you, they'll shore pin it on you."

Joe's Colt whipped out and into line.

His face hardened, his eyes glinted like sunlight on frosted ice.

"Hold up, kid!"

Lon Kent stopped, turned and peered at him in astonishment.

"What's the idea, Joe?"

"The idea," Joe told him harshly, "is that you ain't goin' nowhere with that gold. Think I'm goin' to let you beat me to it twice? Not by a darn sight. Hand it over."

Lon Kent stood staring for a tense ten seconds. Then the surprise in his face changed to an expression of scorn.

"Why, you lousy double-crosser!" he said and let the sack slip to the ground.

Joe's lips curled.

"What did you expect? That I'd pass up this chance so's you'd go on thinkin' Nevada Joe was the hero you pictured him? Shore I'm a double-crosser. Who wouldn't be for five thousand?" He moved towards the sack apparently oblivious to the other. And as he bent over the treasure, Lon sprang.

Joe could have shot him easily enough. Lon thought of this afterwards and concluded that Joe did not want to attract the attention of their pursuers. They closed silently and furiously, but at once Lon realized that he was no match for this burly man. He was clasped tightly, hugged until his ribs cracked under their blanket padding. Then, when the breath had left his lungs, he felt himself swung about until his back was to Joe.

He was given no time to wonder at the reason for this. Joe raised the heavy gun, his glinting eyes fixed on a spot behind the boy's ear. The Colt descended, and Lon slumped forward. Joe lowered him to the ground, face still hard and implacable. Rolling the boy to his back, he holstered the Colt, opened his knife and began slashing at the strips of blanket with which Kent was swathed.

He worked swiftly, for the pursuing riders were close. He could hear them on the brink of the ravine; some were

[*Turn page*]

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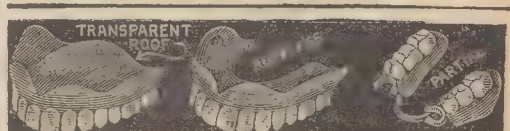

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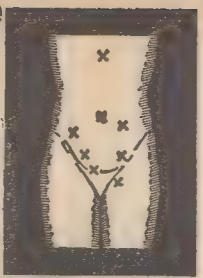

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plunging through the brush with which it was choked. Voices called directions, and among these voices he recognized that of Tug Bodine.

Desperately he sawed at the strips, jerking the severed pieces from beneath the boy's back and tossing them to one side. The last one came free, and sweeping them up in his arms, Joe ran to a clump of brush and thrust the wad behind it. Snatching up the sack, he slung it over the cantle of his saddle, then wheeled just as Tug Bodine broke from the brush and jerked his horse to a halt.

Joe slipped his gun into its holster and raised his hands.

"Reckon you got me," he said, and then Tug recognized him.

"You! By jacks, I'll say I got you!"

HIS Colt roared, and Nevada Joe staggered back a step, dust spurting from his vest where the treacherous bullet had struck. A fiendish grimace crossed Bodine's face as he saw the result of his shot.

"Darned rattler!" grated Joe, and again the Colt leaped into his hand.

Tug fired again, and once more Joe shuddered to the impact of the slug. He staggered forward, a powerful will driving muscles that were numbing fast. His body was mortally hurt, but his brain was clear and burning with a terrible purpose. And again Tug fired—deliberately, coldly, as one would place his bullets in a charging tiger.

The third shot doubled Joe for an instant, but he straightened, and the hand which gripped the six-gun did not tremble. He had to advance in order to get a clear shot at Bodine, and that inexorable advance shook Tug so that his fourth shot missed entirely. And then Nevada Joe halted, and the six-gun in his hand jerked to the recoil. Squarely in the forehead he shot Tug Bodine, and the man was dead when he toppled from his horse. Four more slugs pierced the fellow's body before it struck the ground.

"Hold it, you!" came a shouted com-

mand from the lip of the ravine, and Nevada Joe, swaying on his feet, turned his head and looked up. Sheriff Rutherford, old in the service of the county, was covering him with a rifle. The light was quite strong now.

"Keno, Ed," mumbled the outlaw. He sank slowly to the ground and stretched out on the ground as though infinitely weary.

The sheriff scrambled down the ravine bank, mumbling to himself.

"Called me by name. Now who in time is he?" He hurried to the prostrate man, dropped to his knees beside him. Nevada Joe's eyes were closed.

"Well, I'll be danged!" muttered Sheriff Rutherford. "We all thought you were dead, Joe."

"Nevada Joe," said the man, opening his eyes.

"Were you hit? Mebbe—" He started a swift examination.

"No. It's the end of the owlhoot trail, Ed."

Rutherford spoke in an awed voice.

"Two smack through the lungs and one in the belly. Joe, how in time did you keep yore feet?"

Joe shook his head feebly as though that did not matter.

"Listen, Ed. I'm—comin' clean. I held up the stage. Lon—musta followed me. Chased me down here. His horse stumbled and broke—neck. I got the drop on him, but he jumped me. I knocked him cold with my gun."

Rutherford got up and went over to where the boy lay. There he looked about him, noting everything—the position of the dead horse, the place where the scuffle between the two had occurred, the clump of brush where the blanket strips were hidden. He crossed to the latter and poked around then came back to the dying outlaw.

"Joe," he said shortly, "you're lyin'."

"A dyin' man don't lie, Ed. I'm Nevada Joe. Held up—stage. Lon trapped me. There's—reward—"

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[*Turn page*]

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alive," finished the sheriff grimly. "I know that. You want that Lon should have it. Reckon it will just about put him and his ma on their feet. The spread is mortgaged for just that amount. And I reckon that's why—"

RIDERS were crashing through the brush. Rutherford dropped quickly to his knees again, spoke to the outlaw swiftly, tersely.

"I'll do it, Joe. I'll take care of it. Lon shall have the reward, and the holdup robber was Nevada Joe. Keep yore chin up, feller. Here comes Lon."

Young Kent staggered towards them, his face twisted in pain.

"What's happened, Sheriff?"

Rutherford got to his feet.

"Pitcher just went to the well once too often, I reckon. This feller you caught is Nevada Joe, and there's a reward of five thousand on him. I reckon you get it, Lon."

"But I—"

"Now don't bother to explain now. Reckon you're a bit woozy from that crack on the head. Joe's cashin' his chips and came clean. He admitted to holdin' up the stage, and there ain't any doubt of it. The description of the guard and the driver fits to a T."

"He—confessed?"

"Shore—though a confession wasn't noways needed. He's been a holdup artist for years, and there's his hoss with the gold on his saddle. He knew he wouldn't live to pay for it, so he didn't mind confessin'. Stay here with him while I flag in the boys." He walked on up the ravine, calling loudly.

Kent took his place by the outlaw.

"Joe," he whispered, "why did you do it?"

The outlaw spoke so faintly that Lon had to lean over him to catch the words.

"Better—thataway. I'm done. Tug Bodine got me. But I—nailed him. He won't bother—yore ma—any more."

"You shouldn't have done it," said Kent fiercely. "It ain't fair!"

The outlaw smiled.

"Won't—hurt me—son. Just set tight, and stick—straight—narrow—" His voice trailed off, and Lon saw that he had sunk into the coma which presages death.

"Straight and narrow," whispered the boy broken, and got to his feet. The tears streamed down his face, and his shoulders were shaking. Sheriff Rutherford came up with several horsemen. He thumped Lon on the back.

"Reaction hit you, kid? Wal, best thing for that is work. Strip yore hoss and take Nevada Joe's. Reckon you're entitled to the roan. One of you fellers corral that sack of gold and take it to the stage. Couple more of you pack Tug Bodine out. He's deader'n a salt mackerel and I don't reckon there'll be many mourners."

He dropped again to the side of Nevada Joe.

"How you makin' it, feller?"

Joe's lids flickered open again, but Rutherford saw that his eyes were clouded.

"Fine," he gasped. "You—won't tell him, Ed? Ever?"

"No, I won't tell him—or Nellie. He'll be a better son than you deserve!"

"Thanks." A faint smile came to Nevada Joe's lips and he gave a sigh of infinite relief. Then his body went limp.

Sheriff Rutherford removed his hat. Then he took one of the lax hands in his and shook it gently.

"You shore were hell on wheels," he said fervently, "but in the end I reckon you went a long ways towards payin' 'em back for the hurt you did them. So long, Joe *Kent*."

•

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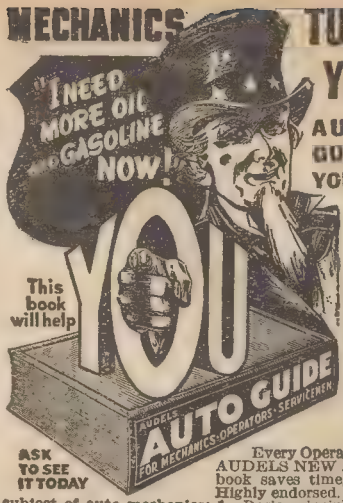

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THE LOANED RANGER

(Continued from page 86)

man's throat, whirled his horse and gigged away as fast as he could go.

McWhortle turned back toward the two pardners. Swap, recovering from Jones' blow, got up. And Whopper was right behind him.

"Money ain't everythin' in the world, Mister McWhortle," said Whopper. "Reckon we'll be goin'." He looked dolefully at the hatful of money behind the tree.

"Wait!" roared the sheepman.

"Not us!" bleated the friends and started to run.

"Hold on, you fools! I've changed my mind about crackin' yore skulls."

"Yuh mean that?" Swap gulped, and his eyes were as big as saucers.

McWhortle grunted, stirring Jones' body with a heavy boot toe.

"Shore. Didn't yuh jiggers save Witherby an' Jones from runnin' off my sheep?"

"Yeah, with the aid o' that bear," said Swap.

McWhortle was actually grinning in his beard.

"Well, to show you I ain't no skinflint, you fellers can take that hatful o' money that was in that larrup jug."

Jones was moaning on the ground. His eyes flipped open.

"So you're wearin' a forest ranger's uniform, are yuh?" asked McWhortle, brandishing the rifle over the rustler's head. "What did yuh do with the real ranger?"

"Shot him," mumbled Jones. "He spotted us with them wet cattle in the hills. Got his body cached in an—an old line cabin on Chimney Ridge."

McWhortle whirled suddenly on the pardners.

"What are yuh waitin' for? Vamoose! Me, I've got work to do. Gotta hogtie Witherby an' this jasper an' pack 'em off to the sheriff in town an' tell him about that wet cattle. Then I've got to round up my woolies. Git, I say, afore I change my mind about

yuh. For all I know yuh're sheep stealers, too!"

Swap and Whopper jumped as if someone had set off an explosion beneath them.

"We're goin', Mister McWhortle," they yelled.

They started downslope along the meadow toward their horses. Suddenly, Whopper came crawling back on hands and knees behind the busy sheepman. He went to the bear-tree, then rejoined Swap. He was carrying the hatful of coins, and he hadn't bothered to switch the money from McWhortle's hat to his own. It meant the sheepman was out two hundred dollars plus one hat.

"Whew! That was close," he said. "Danged near run off without that molasses money. Me, I'm plumb tuckered out after all that work with bears an' molasses an' rustlers. I gotta have rest."

"The pay was purty good, though," said Swap.

Together they pegged off down the meadow. And if there was a swagger to their walk, who could blame them?

•

Next Issue's Swap and Whopper Novelet

PANHANDLING PUNCHERS

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 41

1. Sam Houston, hero of the Texan struggle for independence, was born in the U. S., was Governor of Tennessee, adopted citizen of the Cherokees, citizen of Mexico, leader of the war for the independence of Texas; President of Texas; later, when the Lone Star State became part of the U. S., Governor of Texas.

2. One of the notorious Ford outlaw brothers. He killed Jesse James.

3. Yosemite National Park, Cal.

4. Colonel William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill. "Pahaska" meant "long hair."

5. Known as Annie Oakley, Mrs. Frank Butler was one of the best shots and among the most famous women of the West. Her feats of marksmanship were known throughout the world, as she performed in traveling Wild West shows and circuses.

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Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Thrilling Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owners are: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him, H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of October, 1941. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1943.

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Concluded from page 13)

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